

**Aerial Stars:
Femininity, Celebrity & Glamour in the Representations of Female Aerialists in
the UK & USA in the 1920s and Early 1930s**

Submitted by Catherine Jane Holmes to the University of Exeter
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Abstract

Female solo aerialists of the 1920s and early 1930s were internationally popular performers in the largest live mass entertainment of the period in the UK and USA. Yet these aerialists and this period in circus history have been largely forgotten by scholars. I address this omission by arguing these stars should be remembered for how they contributed to strength being incorporated into some stereotypes of femininity. Analysing in detail Lillian Leitzel, Luisita Leers and, to a lesser extent the Flying Codonas, I employ a cross-disciplinary methodology unique to aerial scholarship that uses embodied understanding to reinvigorate archival resources. This approach allows me to build on the wider scholarly histories of Peta Tait, drawing important conclusions about the form including how weightlessness is constructed and risk is performed.

In the introduction I re-evaluate the nostalgic histories of circus to establish circus' and aerialists' popularity in this period, before exploring how engagements shaped careers. Chapter 1 considers the difference in experiencing aerialists in the USA and UK by bringing together previously unrelated data on circus, variety and vaudeville venues. Aerialists made good celebrities because their acts, located above audience members' heads, challenged the conventional relationship between ticket prices and sightlines. Chapter 2 explores how the kinaesthetic fantasy evoked by experiencing aerial action created glamour and how glamour had the power to reframe femininity in the 1920s. Glamour and celebrity have often been confused and Chapter 3 distinguishes the two before considering what characterises aerial celebrity. Reconfiguring Joseph Roach's public intimacy as skilful vulnerability allows me to analyse how risk was gendered and performed in relationship to skill. The gendering of risk leads me to consider what in society contributed to aerial stardom by drawing upon Richard Dyer's argument that celebrities embody a cultural ambiguity. Female aerialists reframed their femininity in a similar way to women who aspired to the modern girl stereotype in wider society. In the final chapter I expand on the activity of the modern girl, comparing strategies used by young exercising women to female aerialists. This enables me to draw conclusions about how witnessing these stars tapped into national ideas of citizenship, and to designate aerialists as the first to use the power of glamour to make muscular femininity acceptable.

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Author's Declaration

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Introduction

Female aerialists have been forgotten as popular stars of the 1920s and early 1930s and with this forgetting their cultural legacy has been lost. In this thesis I make visible the contribution of female aerialists to the cultures of the USA and UK, arguing they reflected tensions in society regarding gender and contributed to change. When performing on equipment such as trapeze or corde lisse (rope) these women demonstrated strength alongside grace to popular acclaim and, in doing so, radically glamorised their strong and unconventionally muscular bodies. These bodily representations were empowering for young women and reframed strength as feminine, absorbing strength into some stereotypes of femininity. This happened in the context of young women at large challenging conservative pre-Edwardian or Georgian ideals of passive womanhood by refashioning modern expressions of femininity for themselves. Evocative images of the quintessential flapper or modern girl, Louise Brooks, still have the power to capture the imagination but history has forgotten the aerial celebrities that similarly challenged hegemonic ideals. I address this omission by re-evaluating these performers and analysing what representations of their lives and their performances reveal about femininity, glamour and celebrity in the 1920s and early 1930s in the United States of America and Britain.

I have considered the different performance environments these women performed in to properly represent their contribution to society, but with a focus on circus. These women were international performers who performed on a global circuit that gave year round employment to artists through bookings in global circus, American vaudeville, agricultural State Fairs and European variety. This history situates their contribution to culture within these wider contexts but focuses on their circus performances because they were their largest and most prestigious engagements. The most significant circus for the most popular performers was Ringling Bros and Barnum and Bailey Combined Show that provided a long summer season in the USA. During this circus off-season, engagements were gained elsewhere, including the prestigious Bertram Mills Circus in London. These particular circuses provided considerable exposure for performers, promoting them through sophisticated marketing methods and presenting them in front of the largest one-off audiences for live entertainment in either country. In this thesis I

Introduction

consider British and American contexts because a focus on these two countries provides an opportunity to consider international circuits and the influence of global events.

I place the performances of female aerialists at the centre of this thesis and for that reason this introduction begins by detailing the three sets of aerialists who form its focus. After outlining their careers, their differing representations of femininity and relationship to celebrity I outline my historiographical approach to analysing this bodily practice of the past. Circus has changed significantly in the last ninety years despite similar aerial positions being presented to audiences. The section that follows my approach analyses a Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Combined Show programme and Bertram Mills Circus programme to define what circus was in the 1920s and early 1930s – demonstrating significant differences between British and American circus. Although sources such as these circus programmes do exist these sources are fragmentary, whilst secondary literature is at times frustrating and scholarship limited. I therefore consider what is left to speak of circus to highlight some challenges for circus historians, and identify the sources I use that make this project particularly distinctive. The 1920s and early 1930s represent a particularly interesting period for British and American circus that has largely been overlooked by historians. Established narratives of circus history consider the circus in 1920s America to be in decline, and depict Bertram Wagstaff Mills as having rescued British circus from falling out of public favour. I am challenging established narratives of 1920s and early 1930s circuses' popularity and decline by stating that this period represents a particularly interesting era to focus upon that reveals how circus nostalgia has the power to distort narratives. For this reason, I finish this introduction by demonstrating that the existence of fewer circuses in America does not equate to decline if one-off audiences reached the tens of thousands, and that Bertram Wagstaff Mills should be remembered as an astute businessman who took advantage of the renewed popularity of circus in England rather than as the saviour of British circus. This reconsideration of circus history allows me to explore how the industry's success influenced performers' careers and what appearing in the most prestigious circuses meant for the formation of performer personas. Understanding the true popularity of circus as a popular entertainment that inspired the popular imagination situates female aerialists within the realm of stardom. For this reason, I insist these performers be given the recognition they deserve and their rightful opportunity to effect discussions of femininity, celebrity and glamour in the period.

The Performers: Lillian Leitzel, Luisita Leers & the Flying Codonas

The performers I selected as the focus of this thesis have been chosen for their different representations of white femininity and for what they reveal about the distinction between celebrity and popularity. All are designated as popular due to their centre ring position in the Ringling Bros and Barnum and Bailey Combined Show. (See Chapter 2 for more information on status and the centre ring.) Through an analysis that focuses predominantly on two soloists, Lillian Leitzel and Luisita Leers, I unpick how aerial celebrity was constructed and what separates the female celebrity capable of generating enduring allure from the popular performer. Although analysis of solo female drag acts would be a complementary focus of study, the 1920s female impersonator Barquette (Vander Clyde) has not been included in this project because I am interested specifically in how femininity was understood through the white female-sexed body. However, women were not only represented as soloists and the Flying Codonas troupe demonstrates how women were conventionally represented within mixed-gender troupes.

The most significant aerial and circus celebrity of the 1920s was Lillian Leitzel. Born Leopoldina Alitza Pelikan in Breslau, Germany in 1892 she used the German and Bohemian childlike diminutive of Alice, ‘Leitzel’, as her solo stage surname (Pelikan, 1931; Parkinson, 1971). Frequently titled the ‘Queen of the Circus’, her celebrity became strong enough that most circus fans and historians refer to her by the diminutive Leitzel, rather than her full stage name. This choice of surname is interesting because it leaves behind the convention of using the family name to secure success (Könyot, 2015) and instead points to a facet of her performance style. Leitzel combined performed vulnerability with childlike costume (aligned with conservative femininity) with a modern assertive expression of femininity that included sexual agency. She astutely gauged how to perform her femininity and her body at risk to engage audiences (Chapters 4 and 3 respectively). Leitzel’s career began in 1902 performing with her mother, Nellie (also known as Zoe) Pelikan, and two aunts in Leamy Ladies at the Blackpool Tower Circus (Jensen, 2013: 59). However in 1911 Leitzel left the troupe to pursue her own career, initially in American vaudeville, developing the act that made her famous.

Leitzel's performance was broadly split into two sections on roman rings and planche rope,¹ although even ascending or descending from equipment was made spectacular (see Chapters 2-6 for fuller descriptions). At the core of much of Leitzel's repertoire was her ability to perform planches of different descriptions – planche meaning 'board' in French. As an aerial term planche generally refers to the ability to hold the body in a straight or parallel position by the arms despite gravity acting against it. When climbing the rope to reach her roman rings (similar to gymnastic rings) this involved projecting her body up so that it curved over her arm before propelling her body upwards again. When she finally reached the roman rings she would hang from one ring and push her body up again into a planche position with her body curved over her arm before letting it fall, only to use the momentum at the bottom of the swing to assist her pull up again into another planche. Hanging from her rings she would use swivels rigged into her equipment to spin beneath as she struck poses, or would push herself up into a handstand position – a feat made more impressive by the instability of using the rings as a base. It is this section that is considered to demonstrate her grace and skill, although it relies on considerable strength. However, it is the second section on planche rope that is the feat for which she is remembered. This equipment is a rope with a loop attached to the bottom that facilitates the planche turns by allowing the body to pass underneath without hitting the tail of the rope. With her wrist slipped into the loop Leitzel would throw her body over her shoulder in a series of up to 100 revolutions that would be counted by the audience and that appeared violent or frenetic (DeBaugh, n.d.; stleonm, 2010; 'Home video of Lillian Leitzel', n.d.; Bradna and Spence, 1953: 150). Leitzel's astute decision to include such a crowd-pleasing feat of strength and endurance was vital to her success as an aerialist, yet she is always described as feminine.

The scale of her celebrity can be seen through the engagements she secured throughout her career and her legacy in different popular forms following her death. Unusually she secured her first engagement within the prestigious centre ring position in her very first year at Ringling Bros Circus in 1915 (Parkinson, 1971). In the sixteen seasons until her death, Leitzel was employed by a Ringling circus for the long summer season. She secured year-long bookings by performing in the Ziegfeld *Midnight Frolic* for three

¹ 'Planche' is occasionally written as 'plange' by some circus writers (Manning-Sanders, 1952; Bradna and Spence, 1953: 150). Planche is the normal spelling in gymnastics and is the pronunciation I have encountered in my own training.

seasons ('Clipping of Leitzel with fan', 1920) – an engagement that was said to elevate any vaudevillians status - and performed on the big time vaudeville circuit in major American cities. She reached the pinnacle of vaudeville, performing at BF Keith's The Palace in 1924 ('Advertisement', 1924). This winter season was also used to travel to Europe, appearing in circuses and European variety venues. During such a break from Ringling, she performed at the prestigious Bertram Mills Circus during the 1921-22 Christmas season (Bertram Mills Circus, 1921a; 1922). Leitzel returned to England in 1928 to appear at the English equivalent of the Palace, The Palladium, from December 1928 to January 1929 ('Advertisement', 1928; 'Palladium', 1929). On 15 February 1931 Leitzel died as a result of injuries sustained from equipment failure at the Valencia Music Hall in Copenhagen ('Circus Fall Fatal', 1931). Her death was shortly after reimagined as the murder of the fictional Josie LaTour in the book *About a Murder of a Circus Queen* (Abbot, 1933) and its film adaptation, the *Circus Queen Murder* (Neill, 1933). Leitzel's career included bookings in all the major American and British venues and her legacy within circus histories is as one of the few aerial stars whose celebrity was powerful enough to inspire representation in other popular entertainment forms.

Luisita Leers was a popular performer who represented her femininity as youthful rather than childlike and who displayed a muscular physique that became aligned to physical culture movements. Born in Germany around 1912, she started her aerial training at the age of six and first appeared in her father's troupe to replace an injured performer when she was ten years old (Braathen, 1933: 5–7; Leers, 1933: 1–2). She became a soloist at the age of around 16 performing an act on static trapeze and corde lisse. There are fewer sources left to indicate the composition of Leers' act as only photographs and brief descriptions remain. These sources indicate it involved a series of virtuosic positions that required considerable strength, flexibility and balance. Positions included single-arm plances from the static trapeze where Leers would curve her body over her arm and hold her free arm over her head to assist balance in the position, as well as shoulder and back balances, a side-splits hanging from one leg (or hock), and a neck-hang with side-splits that was a signature trick. Leers, like Leitzel, also performed an endurance feat as the spectacular finale to her act. Leers' feat comprised up to 100 muscle grinds, or what I describe as elbow rolls (Atwell, 1931a; 1931c; 1931b; 1931c; n.d.; n.d.; Scala n.d.). This essentially involved using the elbow and mid-back area as a pivot point to revolve

the body around the bar. (See chapters 3-5 for lengthier descriptions of Leers' act.) Leers' act represents a more controlled demonstration of aerial expertise than Leitzel's act.

Like Leitzel, her engagements demonstrate the success she secured throughout her career. She was signed within a year of performing as a soloist by John Ringling when she appeared in Havana, Cuba (Braathen, 1933: 5–6; Tait, 2005: 77). From 1928 to 1933 Luisita Leers appeared at the Ringling-Barnum circus, quickly moving up the hierarchy to centre ring status within her first season. (Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus 1928b; 1928a; 1929a; 1929b; 1930a; 1930b; 1931a; 1931b; 1932a; 1932b; 1933a; 1933b). Leers did not sign with Ringling-Barnum for the 1934 season, due to reduced salaries offered by agents (a situation that will be explored in more detail towards the end of this introduction). By the time Leers was appearing in America, vaudeville was in decline and as a result Shrine Circuses also provided employment during at least one winter break ('Indoor Circus Plans', 1928b). These indoor circuses were, and still are, hosted locally by the Shriners fraternity to generate charitable fundraising (Chindahl, 1959: 135; Shriners International, 2016; Verney, 1978: 76). Agents also secured her bookings in State Fairs, causing problems with her 1932 Ringling-Barnum contract, and in 1934 and 1936 when she no longer worked with the Ringling-Barnum circus (Braathen, 1932a; Leers, 1932; Leers, 1947; Tait, 2005: 87). Leers played a range of significant venues in Europe including the Wintergarten in Berlin and Cirque Medrano in Paris (Leers, 1934b; Tait, 2005: 80). In England Leers played the number one The Palladium and Holborn Empire variety venues in 1931 ('Varieties, &c. advertisement', 1931; 'Variety Theatres', 1931), whilst a letter suggests she later returned in 1934 (Leers, 1934b). Her career was finally concluded by the decision to stay in Germany during the Second World War. Although correspondence indicates Luisita Leers would have liked to return to aerial work, food shortages led her to become too malnourished to receive arm surgery (Leers, 1948b: 1; Leers, 1948a: 1; Tait, 2005: 84 & 89). Leers' early career suggested she would become a celebrity on a par with Leitzel, but the decision not to sign with the Ringling-Barnum circus was pivotal in ending a promising career.

Both Lillian Leitzel and Luisita Leers presented themselves as soloists within the ring. However, the women in the most popular mixed-gender aerial troupe of the 1920s and early 1930s played a secondary ornamental role – rather than being included for skill they were included for aesthetics. Both Clara Curtin and Vera Bruce had circus careers outside

the Flying Codonas as soloists or in different circus disciplines. I do not discuss these careers in this thesis because the Codonas are included for what they reveal about the representation of femininity within mixed-gender troupes. The star of the Flying Codonas flying trapeze troupe was Lillian Leitzel's third husband, Alfredo Codona. Flying trapeze is the aerial practice most readily associated with trapeze: it is where a flyer swings out across the circus space from one trapeze and is caught by the hands of a catcher who hangs from a second trapeze. Alfredo is remembered for performing the triple somersault reliably. He is considered one of the most famous flyers of all time and his brother Abelard (known as Lalo), as the most famous catcher.

The two Mexican brothers were born into the Codona circus family and were the consistent element of the Flying Codonas² act, but also appeared as part of the Siegrist-Silbon troupe until 1917. The Flying Codonas first serious engagements were as a quartet with Wirth Circus in Australia from 1913 to 1915. It was in 1917 at the Circo Pubillones in Havana that they settled on the grouping of the two brothers accompanied by a woman. This ornamental feminine third was included for her attractiveness rather than her skill and was first provided by Alfredo's first wife, Clara Curtin (Jando, n.d.). The troupe continued to work for some of the biggest names in the international circus industry including a number of seasons for *Sells-Floto*, a major competitor of the Ringling circus, and the Cirque Medrano in Paris (Jando, n.d.). During the 1925-6 Christmas season they appeared at Bertram Mills Circus in London (Bertram Mills Circus, 1926), before signing with the Ringling-Barnum unit in 1927 (Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus, 1927a) where they continued to work until 1933 when injury led to Alfredo's retirement as a flyer (Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus, 1933b). Although Lalo continued to work under the Codona name until 1937 (Mills, 1937), without Alfredo the troupe was less famous.

The marriage of Alfredo Codona and Lillian Leitzel on 20 July 1928 (Codona, 1928: 1) led Clara Curtin to leave the troupe at the end of that Ringling season (Codona, 1928b). The Australian Vera Bruce became the feminine element and, following Leitzel's death,

² Their name was frequently misspelled as Cadona, Cordona and Candonas.

the third wife of Alfredo Codona. Throughout their careers the Flying Codonas³ acted as body doubles performing their act in a number of films including *Variété* (Dupont, 1925), *Polly of the Circus* (Santell, 1932) and *The Circus Clown* (Enright, 1934), as well as appearing in the Oscar nominated short documentary detailing their act: *Swing High* (Cummings, 1932). The fictional films were set in the circus and used aerial performers as central protagonists as an attempt to secure financial success precisely because circus was successful. However, notoriety attached to the troupe when Alfredo Codona shot himself and Vera Bruce in her divorce lawyer's office on 30 July 1937 ('Bullets of Codona', 1937). I contend that it is Alfredo's marriage to the celebrity Leitzel that increased his popularity and that this notorious death led him to be remembered as an aerial celebrity. Aerial popularity relies on expert demonstrations of skill, but it also required skill to be balanced with performed and actual risk (see Chapter 3).

Lillian Leitzel, Luisita Leers, Vera Bruce and Clara Curtin were colleagues and competitors who worked at one time or other together on the Ringling Bros and Barnum and Bailey Combined Show. All became popular by embodying elements of femininity that spoke of the 1920s with bodily practices read in light of physical culture movements. However, by presenting active muscular bodies as glamorously feminine, they contributed to changing attitudes to the female body, permitting strength to become incorporated into some stereotypes of femininity. Although all were popular stars, celebrity allure comes along rarely and Leitzel was the epitome of circus celebrity. The power of her celebrity and its relationship to glamour was integral to this process of glamorising the strong female body. When analysing what these women's performances and representations of what their lives mean to society and culture, and for shifts in ideology regarding the female body, my approach is to view their bodies at the centre but from a variety of different directions.

Historiographical Approach

This original approach within the field of circus history of putting these aerialists' bodies at the centre and under such detailed scrutiny, is one that is usefully illustrated by words attributed to Leitzel:

³ Alfredo Codona also appeared as body double for Johnny Weissmuller in *Tarzan and the Ape* (Van Dyke, 1932) and *Tarzan and His Mate* (Gibbons, 1934) and as technical consultant for FW Murnau's 1928 lost classic *4 Devils* (IMDB, n.d.; IMDB, n.d.). I consider it likely the Flying Codonas also performed the flying sequences, particularly as it featured a triple somersault as a plot point (Bergstrom, 2003).

A performer should give as much thought to the manner in which an act is presented as is given to the thing done. Like many professionals I had long practiced before a mirror. But I was never certain that my evolutions at great heights were entirely like those which I did from the ground rings. Then came a happy thought. I purchased a sufficient number of big French mirrors to completely circle me. I then had my practice rope fixed low enough so that I might watch myself in the mirrors while doing my giant half-flanges. You have often heard it said that a looking glass is a woman's best friend. Twelve such 'friends' are exactly a dozen times better. They have taught me to see myself as others see me, and, unlike some friends, they never tell a story ('Gymnast Practices', 1921; similar text in 'Owns 12 Pier Mirrors', 1922).

I find myself looking at the fragmentary evidence of the past as if these are reflected through different mirrors. I do not see Leitzel or the other performers exactly as they saw themselves, or as audience members saw them – that is an impossible task for any historian. Instead, what I see is a slightly warped series of images influenced by my own historical position. Each mirror provides a slightly different perspective on the past that generates different meanings from the source materials, whether that is by looking at Leitzel through the mirror of celebrity or physical culture. Not only that, but the different mirrors require I perceive and understand my own bodily position in the reflection I am reading. My relationship to these performers is as an amateur aerialist and audience member interested in what the past can reveal about culture, society and aerial practice. I view each written phrase, image, item of costume or video with an understanding of aerial movement, to create what I argue are the fullest descriptions of Lillian Leitzel's and Luisita Leers' acts available; still evident in these descriptions are my own decisions about what to place within the frame, and what to leave out. My body and its knowledge of aerial space provide me with a historical imagination that can read into sources the quality of movement and tempo of a performance. One of the reasons Leitzel was a celebrity was because she did give thought to the manner in which her act was presented. My aerial knowledge is useful in uncovering the performed elements that emerge from the imagined performances I have reconstructed on the basis of the evidence discovered.

The five mirrors I use to make meaning of these performances are those that form the chapters of this thesis. Once I have established the popularity of circus in the 1920s in this introduction, I consider what this history meant for the female performers' careers and what it meant for them to appear in these male dominated circuses. I argue that their international mobility enabled the most popular performers to appear alongside rather than under the control of impresarios. This historical information demonstrates how the

circus industry shaped careers, but it does not reveal the differences in experiencing aerial performance that were encountered in different national contexts. Chapter 1 brings together previously unlinked data on venues to consider the various venues where aerialists performed. Aerial performance occurred in theatrical spaces alongside circuses that ranged from the temporarily converted single-ring London Olympia to the three-ring four-stage American circus tent. In this chapter I consider what these different conditions meant for audience members who experienced their acts. I argue that aerialists represented such good celebrities because their acts were moments of democratised privilege that had the power to challenge conventional viewing experiences based upon ticket prices, and that these spaces contributed to glamorisation of the female body.

The mirrors then shift their orientation slightly as I focus in the final four chapters more closely on reconstructing the performances and the performer personas represented in press. Chapter 2 considers the kinaesthetic fantasy evoked by experiencing aerial performance and how this created glamour with its power to reframe femininity. I explore the strong link between female celebrity and glamour because both require an oscillating relationship to distance. Chapter 3 considers what distinguishes celebrity from glamour and aerial celebrity from other forms of celebrity. I reconfigure Joseph Roach's public intimacy as skilful vulnerability, the perfect balancing of performed risk and skill. Lillian Leitzel was a celebrity because she managed this balance perfectly. However, her aerial celebrity was assisted by her ownership of a female body that performed risk by appearing more vulnerable than a male body on aerial equipment. I contextualise issues of gender and femininity more closely in Chapter 4, whilst simultaneously moving outward to consider what in society made aerialists such popular stars and what made Lillian Leitzel the preeminent aerial celebrity. Here I analyse Leers, Leitzel and the Flying Codonas in light of the Euro-Australasian modern girl phenomenon, drawing upon Richard Dyer's argument that celebrities embody an ambiguity at the heart of culture. I demonstrate how solo female aerialists negotiated concerns regarding gender blurring that young women who aspired to the modern girl ideal were also navigating in wider culture. This concern with gender also led mixed troupes to frequently include an unskilled and largely ornamental feminine component. Whereas soloists were able to represent themselves as more assertively modern, the female aerialist as an ornamental dressing for a troupe such as the Flying Codonas reinforced hegemonic gender ideals. In

the final chapter I build upon the active lifestyle of the modern girl and the growing interest in physical movement to consider how female aerialists countered concerns regarding masculinity, by identifying issues active women had to navigate and the strategies they used to mitigate such problems. In doing so, I explore how witnessing physically active female bodies tapped into national ideas of citizenship, and designate aerialists as the first stars to glamorise muscular female bodies to popular acclaim by performing themselves as aristocrats of the air.

By looking at the performances and lives of Lillian Leitzel, Luisita Leers and the female component of the Flying Codonas from various directions, I investigate how these women used varied representations of femininity to glamorise active and muscular bodies within a performance setting. This act of glamorising and at times sexualising the muscular female body through a popular personality allowed them to present a strong body as radically desirable. Through performance and publicity these women, alongside other popular sports stars, glamorised and feminised strength successfully enough that it became an element of some ideals of femininity. Prior to the 1920s strength was not accepted into feminine stereotypes and these women contributed to change. Before considering female aerial soloists and their contribution to culture and society in any detail, it is first necessary to consider what constituted circus of the 1920s and early 1930s.

Historicising 1920s & early 1930s Circus

When viewing today's 'traditional circus' it is tempting to consider it to demonstrate the 'modern' circus tradition that was popular from the late eighteenth century through to the early twentieth century, but this is a misapprehension. Like early twentieth century circus, traditional circus uses a circular performance space and audience configuration to demonstrate individual displays of skill. This is in comparison to 'contemporary circus' or 'new circus', where disciplines traditionally associated with circus are used to tell a story or express an emotional narrative rather than as a demonstration of virtuosic skill.⁴

⁴ This relatively 'new' or 'contemporary' circus movement developed in the late twentieth century and is not necessarily popular. It often dispenses with the circular performance space that once defined circus in favour of temporarily inhabiting theatrical venues. As a performance form it sees itself on the boundary between circus and theatre or, more unusually, live art and has been facilitated by the increased number of formal circus schools rather than the traditional family-based training method. Although I have seen the two terms used fairly interchangeably, with 'contemporary' generally being favoured at present, it should be noted that practitioner and academic John-Paul Zaccarini sees a distinction between the two types of work with contemporary circus expressing a more mature expression of the form (2013).

Introduction

Traditional circus may not provide direct access to circus of the past but it is possible to see in both traditional and contemporary circus, some of the skills and movements performed by past practitioners that have been handed down to today's practitioners through body-to-body transmission. The separation of circus into two different strands today, contemporary and traditional, demonstrates that the performance form has not remained unchanged over the last ninety years but has instead developed in two very different directions. It is tempting to assume that the term 'circus' is stable, but today it evokes two different performance genres. In the 1920s and early 1930s 'circus' similarly evoked something different depending on whether you were attending in America or in Britain.

Analysing American and British programmes from the 1920s provides a more accurate understanding of what distinguished circus on both sides of the Atlantic. It reveals more than just the type of acts experienced when visiting the circus in this period but also points to modern circus' origins and the reason for the circular shape of the performance space, and highlights that transatlantic exchange occurred between England and America from the earliest days of the performance form. The programmes compared in this section are from the two largest and most prestigious circuses in the period in each respective country: Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Combined Show in America and Bertram Mills Circus at Olympia in London (Bertram Mills Circus, 1926; Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus, 1929c).

The high proportion of equestrian displays presented in both American and British circus programmes is a legacy of circus' origins. Modern circus developed from equestrian displays in London in the late eighteenth century and both 1920s programmes rely strongly on displays of skilled horsemanship: over a quarter of the 1929 programme in Ringling Bros and Barnum and Bailey Combined Show and over a third in the 1925-6 Bertram Mills Circus programme. The performances presented by showmen such as Philip Astley in the late eighteenth century were displayed in a circular space (Speaight, 1980: 24 & 31; Stoddart, 2000: 13; Loxton, 1997: 10); the circular configuration allowing the horse to turn but also 'creating a centrifugal force through the galloping horse which bolstered the balance of the rider' (Stoddart, 2000: 14). In turn this shape gave title to the popular performance form: a circus also being a natural amphitheatre and fashionable place for eighteenth century English gentlemen to ride (Speaight, 1980: 34; *OED*, 2014a).

The modern circus therefore came to mean a circular performance space borne out of equestrian entertainments and disciplines deemed to complement the demonstrations of skilled horsemanship.

The equestrian entertainments of the late eighteenth century were soon accompanied by other exhibitions of skill such as vaulting, tumbling and juggling (Speaight, 1980: 24 & 28; Ward, 2014: 39; Simon, 2014: 31). Although other proprietors were adding disciplines to circus, Philip Astley is generally credited as the originator of modern circus due to his showmanship and introduction of a comedic, clown figure (Speaight, 1980: 31). It is this Astleyian circus developed in Britain that is credited as having transferred to, and become popular in, America through John Bill Ricketts' establishment of his circus in Philadelphia in 1793 (Baston, 2013: 5; Ward, 2014: 44; Simon, 2014: 36). This translation of the industry from Britain to America represents the first example of transatlantic exchange in circus between the USA and UK.

The equestrian acts displayed in the 1920s at Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Combined Show in America and Bertram Mills Circus in Britain included the equestrian skill and comedic riding of circus' early origins but also encompassed a wider variety of acts than in the days of Astley. These included 'liberty' displays where unbridled horses performed routines under the direction of a human leader or 'haute école' (high school) using dressage techniques. Accompanying these horse-focused displays in programmes were acts that can be broadly grouped into: animal acts (domestic and wild); gymnasts (acrobats, equilibrists, perch acts and aerialists); demonstrations of the extraordinary (feats of strength); comedic/clown; and thrill acts (such as a man being shot out of cannon).

What united these performances were displays of skill and control and the framing of an act as spectacular or extraordinary. This might be the skilful clown provoking laughter from the audience through a body that expertly exaggerates movements or performs pratfalls; the extraordinary bodily skill of muscular strength and control demonstrated by equestrians, gymnasts and strongmen or strongwomen; the incredible control (both visible and invisible to the audience) of some men and women over horses and domestic or exotic wild animals; or it might be the exceptional risk a person might undergo when being shot out of a cannon. Most of these acts place the bodies of those performing at

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risk, but all were performing acts that most audience members would consider beyond their ability to replicate. This analysis of the skills on display and their framing leads me to describe the experience of attending 1920s and early 1930s circus as one that involved laughter, thrill and wonder.

Helen Stoddart defines the modern circus experience by using a textual analysis of advertising rather than a consideration of the skills displayed in programmes with similar results. Her approach reviews modern circus advertising for the common adjectives used: 'These can be divided into attributes (exoticism, gorgeousness, skill, novelty, magnificence, danger, display, beauty, action, spectacle) and effects (sensation, delight, wonder, humour, suspense, astonishment)' (2000: 85). Stoddart's scrutiny of advertising in combination with my analysis of skills provides a picture of circus as a vibrant, thrilling, beautiful, colourful, awe-inspiring and sensational popular entertainment.

Although both 1920s American and British circus programmes contained the same acts brought together in similar programmes, the American circus developed its own distinctive features. One example of an act shared by both of these programmes was the Flying Codonas flying trapeze troupe. In America the tent became the most common performance space. This began in 1825 with a simple 'pavilion' and developed until vast tents were created with the capacity to hold over 16,000 audience members nearly 100 years later (Dahlinger Jr 2012 pp.202 & 224). The tent provided the circus with the opportunity to travel and with it the term 'tenting' became synonymous with the circus as a travelling industry exhibiting under canvas. Tents may have enabled the circus to travel, but the railroad⁵ provided the circus with the capability to expand on a grand scale until the circus arena eventually comprised four stages and three rings. This also led to a unique experience for audience members where up to seven acts would perform simultaneously. The railroad provided the logistics that enabled transportation of the largest circus tents across the country. As a result, the term 'railroad circus' came to mean both the transportation method and the largest operations in the industry.

The vast size of the largest American circus spaces prevented some acts being included or forced them to adapt. Space functioned differently in circus performance spaces on

⁵ I use the Americanised term railroad when discussing the American circus because of its significance as a circus term that connotes scale.

both sides of the Atlantic and I focus on this in Chapter 1. In particular, it is interesting to note that an English circus displayed juggling in 1921 (Bertram Mills Circus, 1921a). This discipline is currently considered a core circus skill in the UK, whereas juggling does not appear anywhere on the vast American programme reviewed here. The huge scale of the American performance space dictated that only acts that could be seen clearly could be part of the programme. It also forced the clown to become silent under the American big top (Davis, 2002: 171; Dahlinger Jr, 2012: 220), his voice unable to be heard in a performance space whose size was comparable to a modern arena.

Circus in the 1920s and early 1930s was an international industry with circuits of international performers, but it was also an industry that had distinct national identities. The difference in programme highlights the similarities and differences in modern circus on both sides of the Atlantic as well as indicating the experiential characteristics of the circus experience. Considering these programmes in light of the descriptions of Leers, Leitzel and the Flying Codonas engagements provided earlier, the programmes demonstrate a difference in viewing expectations on both sides of the Atlantic: in America pleasure was achieved by viewing acts annually that competed for attention; whilst in Britain the novelty of focusing on a premier act was more important when fewer acts were billed and the duration of the performance was shorter. Commercial success in the global industry of circus required proprietors adapt the form to its national context. This transatlantic exchange of performers highlights the global nature of circus whilst emphasising that national adaptations of these strategies were required to appeal to distinctly American or British publics. These national markets led to separate timelines of popularity and decline that will be explored and questioned later in this introduction. However, before discussing issues of historical narrative and nostalgia it is necessary to consider the sources and scholarship that represent circus history.

Circus Sources

Circus literature exists as an intriguing and frustrating body of literature that presents challenges to the circus historian that must be understood before discussions of history can be undertaken. As a popular performance form circus has attracted little serious scholarship yet there is a huge body of popular literature devoted to it. Circus enthusiasts, performers and managers have generated thousands of circus histories and memoirs on the subject. Raymond Toole Stott comprehensively surveyed this literature from 1958 to 1971 in *Circus and Allied Arts: a world bibliography*. This included over 13,086

entries (1971: 287) over four volumes. It is hard to estimate what the figure would be nearly half a century later. The problem for the researcher is not just where to start with such a huge body of work but with the nature of the sources themselves. Not only has 'quantity tended to obscure quality' (Toole-Stott, 1958: 13), the publications tend to represent circus as they wish it to be seen rather than as it was. Whether history or memoir, the anecdotal story is woven into the narratives told by individuals who have a vested interest in how circus is or was understood by the general public.

The more useful histories are those that direct the researcher to the location of primary source materials but the majority of enthusiast histories instead recount the same much-repeated stories. It is hard to ascertain the factual elements within these stories, including specific dates, because they often contradict each other, even when authors appear more reliable through their use of marginal referencing. The facts of certain events are also obscured because circus has excelled at creating fictional narratives that were deliberately aimed at boosting ticket sales. This is further complicated when authors attempt to create a more dynamic engagement with the reader, perhaps to express the vibrancy and excitement of circus through fictionalisation: ascribing emotions and thoughts to key figures within the history being told. These fictionalised histories are often rigorously researched but this narrative strategy makes it difficult to distinguish between fact and fiction. Stoddart expresses this frustration with circus literature when she describes it to 'frequently demonstrate enough cavalier indulgence of fancy over fact to make the occasional Gradgrind⁶ out of the investigator. ...circus history and circus mythology have become very much entwined' (2000: 1–2).

Despite the frustration of encountering contradictory information and fictionalisation, the very stories that feature in popular literature and the mythologies they create make them useful. Jacky Bratton has highlighted how anecdotal stories have value 'beyond combing through them for factual statements' and that instead 'the recounting of anecdotes... may be understood... as a process of identity-formation that extends beyond individuals to the group or community in which they belong' (2003: 101–2). The stories told in histories written by circus fans and the memoirs written by performers and

⁶ Stoddart is interested in the representation of circus disciplines in fiction and film and uses this reference to Dickens' character to illustrate how easy it is to become fixated on finding the facts, figures and dates that are obscured in popular writing.

managers provide interesting source material precisely because they demonstrate the myths those invested in circus wished to perpetuate about particular disciplines of performers and the circus industry itself.

Primary & Experiential Sources

Researching the careers of specific performers is challenging due to the limited coverage gained by individual acts alongside the specificity of circus terminology. Not only are the stories told about performers in newspapers subject to circus' willingness to tell fictional stories in its hunger for publicity, the coverage gained by performers is often small.

Circus programmes involved a large number of acts and as such reviews are focused on the entire event, resulting in only the highest profile stars gaining a few lines of coverage.

As one contemporary American reporter remarked on the task of reviewing: 'It would take too much space to name each and every act, so only the high spots can be touched' ('Greatest Show', 1917). Analysis also reveals that there is an issue with vocabulary.

Circus performers are skilled and each discipline has developed its own terms that at their simplest specify equipment and at a more complex level describe movements.

When considering aerial performance, it appears that some reporters consider all aerial equipment to be trapeze. For instance, most reports of the aerialist Lillian Leitzel's death state that she died performing on trapeze yet she actually died on roman rings ('Circus Fall Fatal', 1931; 'Lillian Leitzel Improves', 1931). This can be frustrating because movement possibilities are dictated by aerial equipment. The circus memoir and popular history then become the one location where acts are described in any detail. The memoir, with all the problems implicit in remembered events, tends to group the performance into one homogeneous event. There is no discussion of how the act may have developed over time or have been adapted for different locations such as the vaudeville or variety stage. Although this makes it difficult to speculate on changes to the acts, by analysing circus memoirs, correspondence, video, and costume together I have been able to speculate about and historicise some possible developments.

Circus was an international industry in the 1920s and archives related to circus and specific performers remain as fragments scattered across the world. Reasons for this may include: the necessity to travel light as a global performer; the fact that the embodied

practices demonstrated in the circus are more resistant to documentation;⁷ and the industry's status as popular. What does remain are a series of disparate fragments held in public archives and in private collections across the globe. Although some attempts have been made to provide a list of archives devoted to circus by different circus organisations, these cannot be comprehensive especially as it would be impossible to list all private archives.⁸

I draw evidence for this history from materials held in key archives in the UK and USA.⁹ Gathering my fragmentary evidence has required a thorough understanding of archives to discover enough information to write this thesis. I have supplemented the archival sources discovered with online searches of both American and British publications and digitised archival resources. However, the time period has provided some issues because British newspaper sources within the last one hundred years require specific subscriptions. Sadly, I am certain that I have not uncovered all the sources that relate to Bertram Mills Circus, The Palladium or the Holborn Empire in the years Leitzel, Leers and the Flying Codonas performed in England.¹⁰ American newspaper searches after 1922 suffer from a similar problem (those prior to 1922 have been digitised by the Library of Congress).¹¹ The Ringling Bros and Barnum and Bailey Combined Show probably did generate more newspaper sources as it travelled the USA than Bertram Mills Circus at Olympia; this and issues of access have meant that the majority of newspaper reports quoted in this thesis are American. Although fragmentary, the sources

⁷ Degerbøl & Nielsen (2015) highlight issues related to documenting embodied practices today in proposing edited audiovisual material as a fruitful method and output for documenting circus training.

⁸ Both the American Circus Historical Society (2013) and the Fédération Mondiale du Cirque (2014) have attempted to pull together such a list of archives. Both lists are useful and lengthy but neither is definitive even when describing public collections. For instance, in October 2014 neither listed the Fenwick Collection held by Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums or the circus boxes held in the Mander & Mitchenson Collection at the University of Bristol Theatre Collection.

⁹ In the UK these were the National Fairground Archive, University of Bristol Theatre Collection and V&A Theatre and Performance Archives. In the USA these were the Tegge Circus Archive, Circus World Museum, the Harvard Theatre Collection and the Billy Rose Collection at New York Public Library. Archivists generously sent resources from the Circus and Allied Arts Collection at the Milner Library at Illinois State University and the HJ Lutzer Stark Center for Physical Culture & Sports at the University of Texas.

¹⁰ The V&A Theatre and Performance Archive holds within the Cyril Mills Collection a press book that includes all the coverage gained for first the Bertram Mills Circus season (Bertram Mills Circus, 1921b) and indicates I have found only a small proportion of coverage.

¹¹ In some cases I have supplemented post-1922 newspaper sources with those from the New York state area that are freely available via the constantly expanding Fulton History website.

consulted throughout this project do build a rich picture of female aerialists and the contexts in which they performed.

This project and access to these primary sources has enabled me draw upon a diverse body of source material to invigorate my historical imagination. Although a large amount has been paper based, I have also been privileged to speak to circus practitioners and experts as well as use the training space as a way to test whether my hypotheses regarding practice were correct. During the course of this research I interviewed the British-based early twentieth century performer Yolán Könyot about her family's experience of performer circuits (2015). I also had the opportunity to conduct lengthy discussions about American circus with the performer and collector, Timothy Tegge whilst consulting his archive. Access to his collection was particularly significant when researching the careers of Leitzel and the Flying Codonas as I was the first academic researcher to consult the Codona Family Collection and the complementary materials Timothy Tegge has acquired. Not only does the Tegge Circus Archive include personal correspondence predominantly between members of the Codona family (including Leitzel), photographs, souvenir photobooks and posters, it also includes home video, costumes and other physical ephemera such as a set of Leitzel's training rings. It seems somehow fitting that, for a project that puts the bodies of performers under such scrutiny and proposes audience responses, my physical response as a researcher was an integral part of the process of historical reimagining.

The evidence that has fuelled my historical imagination is a rich and fragmentary body that functions like fleeting images glanced in mirrors I crane my neck to see. It is comprised of snatched traces and physical responses. It is research informed by practice: whether that is stitching together single lines of text found in newspaper reports with memoir by interrogating them with my bodily understanding as an aerialist and audience member; discussing the historical circus industry with performers and relating that to my previous career as a marketer; standing in the training space trying to work out how a movement could work; or trying to understand what in my practice is performed. What is missing are explicit statements of how different groups of individuals received aerial performance, leaving me to read between the lines by considering the tone of literature or to speculate on possible interpretations. My analysis of what these primary and

experiential sources mean for aerialists and circus has also been developed using a limited body of circus and aerial scholarship.

Circus Scholarship

The field of circus studies is currently undergoing a well overdue period of unprecedented growth. Within the last year few years major works such as *The Circus Studies Reader* (2016), *Cirque Global – Quebec’s Expanding Circus Boundaries* (2016) and *The American Circus* (2012) have brought together essays by a diverse range of experts within the field; whilst the increased number of recent PhD theses completed within the last few years are encouraging (Stephens, 2012; Gils, 2013; Zaccarini, 2013; Carter, 2014). However, much of this scholarship concerns the contemporary rather than the historical moment. Despite the international nature of performer circuits in the 1920s and early 1930s, little scholarship focuses on aerial performance or circus as a global institution in the period I cover in this thesis. In fact, circus histories tend to focus on circus within national boundaries from the late eighteenth century to the turn of the twentieth century, with some scholars treating the 1920s and early 1930s at the very peripheries of their interest (Davis, 2012; Wittmann, 2012b; Davis, 2002; Stoddart, 2000). A limited number of circus histories do consider global or transatlantic exchange prior to the 1920s and early 1930s. These indicate a special relationship between British and American circus that stems from the export of British circus to America and its remarkable success in the USA (Stoddart, 2000; Arrighi, 2012; Baston, 2013). This earlier emphasis is partly a nostalgic reflection of established narratives of popularity and decline. It is perhaps for this reason that this thesis is the only scholarly work to date that considers the period in detail and explores the relationship between British and American circus.

Those British and American histories whose primary focus is earlier than mine have highlighted themes that emerge when circus and circus history is discussed. These include popularity, modernity, class, nostalgia, ritual, carnival and gender. In exploring some of these themes in this section on scholarship I begin by examining each body of literature loosely within its national boundaries for what the national reveals about the global context. Moving from the wider field of circus I analyse scholarship devoted to aerial performance and aerial histories, highlighting further themes and concerns that relate specifically to aerial performance such as gender, 1920s celebrity, aerial reception, definitions of the form and of aesthetics. These discussions highlight how my emphasis on an aerial body within its contextual history has relevance to contemporary practice.

Although American histories of circus are generally interested in earlier events they do give limited consideration to the 1920s and early 1930s as the later limits of what is perceived to be the Golden Age of American circus (Davis, 2002; Wittmann, 2012a). The interest of these historians is in circus as a nineteenth century American cultural institution that visibly demonstrated American industrialisation and imperialism (Davis, 2002; Davis, 2012), prefigured the global absorption of American culture through global touring (Wittmann, 2012b); or was at the centre of the cultural identity of New York (Wittmann, 2012a). Although Matthew Wittman's argument about American circus' touring suggests consideration of circus as a global industry, it instead demonstrates the one-way traffic of cultural exchange. Although these histories focus on an earlier period that is fixed within national boundaries they highlight its importance as a cultural institution and provide valuable insights into how circus functioned as an industry in America.

Established scholarship considers American circus to be in decline in the 1920s (Davis, 2002: 229; Truzzi, 1968; Wittmann, 2012a: 11). The date of decline originates from Marcello Truzzi's influential article that bases much of its argument on the reduced number of circuses travelling the USA from 1903 onwards (1968). Truzzi's core argument is that the rise of mass communications and zoos led audiences to view circus as less novel and therefore less thrilling. This emphasis on novelty corresponds to Arrighi's more recent argument that ideas of new and newest were at heart of circus' appeal and that circus declined when individuals participated in rather than viewed modernity (2012: 182). However, where Arrighi is vague about exactly when this decline happened, Truzzi's argument has been instrumental in designating when, even though he does not include the impact of global events such as the First World War on the industry. Although decline may be linked to changing perceptions to novelty, I argue in the next section of this introduction that the data used to establish the timeline of American circus' decline is unreliable and has led to a distortion of when this decline actually occurred. The 1920s should instead be considered as successful and the popularity of its stars as widespread.

I use both Davis (2002) and David Weeks' *Florida: the Ringling Years* (1993) to establish financial and logistic reasons for this misconception that stems from disruption to the

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American railroad as a result of the First World War. In describing the logistics of putting a circus on the rails, Davis highlights the importance of the railroad in transporting the giant American circus across the country. Whereas Weeks' book is primarily a close description of John Ringling's financial dealings in Sarasota Florida, in doing so it also describes a great deal about the decline of the largest circus in America (or anywhere else in the world): Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Combined Show. By reading Davis and Weeks in conjunction with an understanding of railroad disruption during and following the First World War, I define decline differently and conclude that this date occurred later than is stated in established circus narratives.

Circus practitioners today self-identify as belonging to a progressive industry due to the high profile nature of women's involvement historically within it and circus scholarship echoes this emphasis. Davis provides one of the most nuanced descriptions of women's representation within the circus as whole, exploring the contradictions in circus' representations of femininity. One of Davis' core arguments is that the displays of non-normative bodies challenged ideologies of race and gender whilst also reinstating many of the social hierarchies it appeared to subvert (2002). In *Circus Age* she demonstrates how circus management took advantage of the growing women's movements, whilst framing performers as domestic or emphasising the opportunity to see the female form unusually exposed (2002: 82–141). Subsequent popular and academic works (Adams and Keene, 2012; Ward, 2016) have not always built on the complexity of Davis' argument. These works consider circus representations to inspire women to be more adventurous and bold without highlighting the management structures that complicate an empowered reading of female circus performers. In arguing that female aerialists represented empowering images of femininity I build on Davis' consideration of wider structures. At the end of this introduction I examine how popularity enabled female performers to appear alongside management, rather than under their control, due to the public mobility of stars across international touring circuits.

Like historians of American circus, historians of British circus privilege the Victorian period. Those that deal with the 1920s and early 1930s in any detail treat it as part of wider histories appealing to both enthusiast and academic readers. David Jamieson provides the most detailed information on British circus from 1919 to the 1960s by focusing on the country's largest circus on a year by year basis (1998). In situating

Bertram Mills Circus within the wider circus industry, Jamieson provides useful data that I use later in this introduction to argue that Bertram Mills is not remembered for the right reasons. Where Jamieson's year by year approach provides specific dates for change, Steve Ward's longer circus history includes within it some chapters that acknowledge the two-way flow of foreign performers and highlight issues such as the granting of labour permits and the Entertainment Tax (Ward, 2014: 134–172).

Evident in circus histories and wider scholarship is a concern with class in British circus. Anthropologist Yoram Carmeli draws on popular literature published between 1935 and 1952, analysing four circus books to reveal trends in circus' representation of itself that establish a bourgeois hegemony within British circus (1995). Carmeli highlights preoccupations with lineage and family, royal attendance and the British origins of circus to demonstrate how these concerns have established hierarchies; whilst Marius Kwent has argued when discussing Philip Astley's career that 'The history of circus has been bound up with a class-inflected history of national identity' (2012: 221). In analysing both American and British circus newspaper coverage I have found lineage to be common to both national contexts. Privileging genealogy indicates a preoccupation with class in both British and American circus.

Connecting class and cultural capital in circus scholarship is nostalgia. It is a theme that recurs throughout this thesis and is particularly relevant to glamour (Chapter 3) and female aerialists' performances of aristocracy. Nostalgia was utilised by circus impresarios as a strategy of legitimisation prior to the form's export to America. Astley evoked an imagined fantasy of a bygone Tudor age in performance and publicity whilst Andrew Ducrow's 'certain cultural respectability [was derived from] ...dramatisations of myth, opera, history and literature' (Kwent, 2012: 220; Stoddart, 2000: 19–20). Although Stoddart does not explicitly use the word nostalgia in connection with cultural legitimacy, Kwent does. It is perhaps this earliest evocation of the present and imagined past in performance that has led nostalgia to be a recurrent theme in circus historiographies noted by Arrighi. She considers Thomas Frost's first historiography to have 'set the tone... he viewed the present through the prism of the past, thus revealing that attitudes of modernity competed with pre-modern attitudes' (2012: 181). This legacy of nostalgic historiography has encouraged recent scholarship to continue romanticising its histories (Simon, 2014). In this introduction nostalgia has particular significance as I consider it to

have the power to distort narratives of popularity and decline and in doing so to diminish the stardom of circus celebrities.

This viewing of the present through an idealistic past has created a strange circus temporality which may have led some to consider circus as ritualistic or carnivalesque. Paul Bouissac has been influential in developing circus as an academic field by emphasising the ritualistic nature of circus (1976; 2014). Although his analyses are useful they privilege the semiotic approach above all others and tend towards universal statements that I find problematic as a historian who wishes for specificity. Framing the circus as carnivalesque or grotesque has been used to suggest a second life of temporary inversion (Assael, 2005; Gils, 2013) that stretched at the boundaries of acceptability whilst still provoking concerns within wider society. I situate my circus history specifically within the context of 1920s and early 1930s. In a period when glamour was developing as an aesthetic that was facilitated by sophisticated promotional techniques and that included the possibilities of transgression. By exploring the circus and its stars as glamorous in publicity and performance, I consider popular entertainments as permitting the radical to appear within the mainstream rather than as part of a temporary inversion. Although I argue that circus was glamorous in this period, I also examine how aerial performance casts a glamour over its audiences (Chapter 2).

Aerial Scholarship

Narrowing my focus from wider circus history to the smaller field of aerial performance, there are few scholarly histories or analyses of the form. The most significant aerial history is Peta Tait's wide-ranging *Circus Bodies* which analyses the cultural significance of the aerialist's gendered body (2005). This rich work traces themes and trends from the origins of aerial performance in the mid-eighteenth century to the early twenty-first century. As with much of Tait's work, it is interested in how the reception of aerial performance leads non-normative bodies in terms of race and gender, to be perceived within different historical periods (Tait, 2005; Tait, 1996a; Tait, 1996b). Helen Day's wider investigation of aerialists as Victorian female daredevils (1999) and descriptive histories complement Tait's scholarship (Gossard, 1994; Brunsdale and Schmitt, 2013).

Circus Bodies provided the impetus for my examination of Leers, Leitzel and the Flying Codonas. Tait, as well as Stoddart, designates female aerialists of this period as popular celebrities and stars but neither focus on the cultural reasons why they might have been

celebrities in the 1920s and early 1930s (Tait, 2007; Stoddart, 2000: 55–60; Tait, 2005).¹² Via a detailed consideration of the period and these performers' acts I interrogate how aerial celebrity is differentiated from other forms of celebrity (Chapters 1, 2 & 3) and what this celebrity tells us about 1920s and early 1930s society in Britain and America (Chapters 2, 4 & 5). In exploring how historically situated aerial bodies responded to societal norms Tait outlines a reception theory for aerial performance that draws upon Merleau-Ponty (2005: 141–152; 2000). I expand on this reception theory by combining it with my understanding of aerial movement, and more general theories of the kinaesthetic system outlined by Susan Foster in *Choreographing Empathy* (2011).

Tait's work has laid the foundations for scholars to write further histories and reflections on the aerial form from the perspective of various academic disciplines. Kinesiology has led to a history that explores how the carnivalesque space above enabled performers to push gender boundaries (Gils, 2013). These case studies are interesting in uniting the aviator and aerialist but, for me, lack detailed historical context and descriptions of performance. Katrina Carter's thesis combines an interest in history and current practice by privileging the non-normative body of the disabled aerialist, exploring where they have been forgotten and examining what new qualities of movement these aerialists can add to the form (2014). Elsewhere the contemporary moment has received attention from: human geography through examining the potential political power of the aerialist alongside the clown in Canada from a practitioner's perspective (Stephens, 2012); and through ethnography that explores how traditional and contemporary circus display gender differently, arguing that traditional aerial acts reinforce gender binaries through 'costumes and the way of moving' that obscure the potential of the aerial form for playing with gender codes (Sizorn, 2016: 500). The focus on gender representation performed through costume and movement in Sizorn's article¹³ is one I extend throughout this thesis by also drawing on press and publicity, whilst both Stephens' and Carter's theses are important in making statements about aesthetics of the form that I develop in more detail. These are most explicitly described as 'muscularity and athleticism, the mythical defiance of gravity, the performance of risk and the portrayal of

¹² In a separate article Tait provides an answer for female aerialists' celebrity being overlooked, considering their muscular acts more easily forgotten due to the embodied nature of their performances (2006). The power of nostalgia to corrupt narratives of popularity is another reason.

¹³ Sizorn has written more extensively on aerial performance and circus in French, including her full length work *Trapezistes* (2013).

pain-free control', (Carter, 2014: 79; see similar descriptions in Stephens, 2012: 203). In particular, I highlight how weightlessness is constructed (Chapter 2) and examine how the performance of risk works in relationship to skill (Chapter 3).

Aerial scholarship defines who is an aerialist in different ways and reflects the wider question within circus itself. I designate the aerialist as defined by suspension and the movement possibilities it provides, due to terminology encountered within my training spaces. This definition excludes wire-walkers because suspension creates different movement possibilities to balancing upon. Although some slack-rope practitioners will create a horizontal swing with the rope, hanging from equipment makes the swing an integral part of suspended movement rather than a choice. Understanding the swing, the almost imperceptible moment where gravity and momentum equalise, is important in understanding how the impression of weightlessness is created by aerial movement. This has further and important repercussions for my discussions of how aerial performance is experienced by an audience.

Beyond works that deal with historical performers or current practice female aerialists have received attention for representations within film and literature that stress the power of the figure on the imagination (Ritter, 1989; Russo, 1994; Stoddart, 2000: 166–192). Although not always the sole focus of the work, writers position the aerialist as a site of fantasy (Stoddart, 2000: 166–192), an imaginary space of the sublime (Russo, 1994) or transformation (Ritter, 1989). I am interested primarily in the physical practice rather than fictional representations of it. However, what these representations indicate about physical practice is that experiencing aerial performance includes within it a fantasy of transformation. What I later refer to as kinaesthetic fantasy will recur throughout this thesis, but is most significantly explored in Chapter 2.

Writing on circus is a varied body of work. Working within the field requires analysing sources for the usefulness of their data, anecdotes and the rigour of their arguments. As such, this literature review is not exhaustive because it cannot survey all the popular literature that has value alongside scholarly works – in fact, sometimes the line between one and the other can appear somewhat blurred. In this discussion I have demonstrated the themes of relevance to this thesis and where my arguments sit in relation to it. Circus is nostalgic. It reflects and performs hierarchies in wider society and has provided

complicated representations of femininity. As a mass entertainment industry, it created female stars in the 1920s and early 1930s who need to be analysed for precisely how empowering they truly were. Amongst the highest profile of these stars was the female aerialist who captured the popular imagination through acts that audiences experienced as potentially transformative. What these works do not explore is how the female aerialist of the 1920s and early 1930s was glamorous; how the celebrity of stars like Leitzel was constructed; what that celebrity tells us about society and culture; or what this detailed examination of examples of practice tells us about aerial itself. That is the work I undertake in this thesis.

Re-evaluating Circus Narratives of Popularity

The discussion of circus scholarship has already demonstrated that I am challenging the established narratives of circus popularity and decline and has hinted that I consider nostalgia a reason for the distortion. Uncritically accepting established narratives diminishes the widespread popularity of the aerialists who form the focus of my analysis. Nostalgia does not see the world objectively and has already been shown to be intimately connected to modern circus and its histories from its earliest days. I challenge these narratives because the 1920s represent the era of the giant circus outfit as it travelled America on the railroad. In Britain, circus was entering a period of renewed popularity that was led by more than just one circus proprietor. It is within this period of popularity that international performers appeared in national circuses. Their careers were influenced by global and national circus histories and by the power the most popular circuses had to shape public images through status and publicity. For this reason, I explore the implications of the contractual changes Gumpertz instigated in the early 1930s, publicity offered by Ringling and Mills and how the mobility of performers enabled female stars to demonstrate control over their professional careers despite appearing in such publicly male managed circuses.

The established narratives of popularity and decline evident in popular publications and circus scholarship display a contradiction that requires interrogation. Those that consider American circus in the 1920s describe it as in decline (Davis, 2002: 229) despite also noting that the largest ever one-off circus audience of 16,702 was recorded in Concordia, Kansas on 13 September 1924 (Davis, 2002: 293; Dahlinger Jr, 2012: 224). The circus performed in each city it visited twice in one day and it should be noted that these figures account for just one of those performances. The high audience figures of 1924 do not

suggest that circus was in decline, instead they indicate that these figures and the material conditions affecting circus need questioning. Business strategies of acquisition and consolidation have led circus historians to misapprehend American circus as in decline due to fewer circuses travelling the country – instead this indicates a movement within the industry towards consolidation resulting in fewer giant circuses. Examining British circus narratives reveals a different misapprehension when closely considering the years following the First World War. Bertram Wagstaff Mills is portrayed as the saviour of British circus and is credited as having inspired ‘a renaissance of the English circus’ (Speaight, 1980: 20). This is not an accurate portrayal of Bertram Mills, who is represented as such because of his effective marketing of his circus and the success of the Bertram Mills Circus tenting operation from the 1930s which brought the title to audiences beyond London.

Why do these misapprehensions emerge? Nostalgia relies on imagining today a better idealised past. It is evident in circus’ designation as a childish entertainment despite the fact that adult concerns such as sexuality and gender are represented. Circus is imagined as a simple and naïve entertainment that reminds one of youth, inspiring the ‘grown-up boys... [to be] quite as excited as the juveniles’ (*Circus in Town*, 1919). Although this description was written in 1919, it could as easily describe the appeal of today’s traditional circus – circus has the potential to ignite memories of a better past of youthful naivety within the imagination. Combine this with the nostalgic practices aimed at securing success and historiographies that insist on telling the present through the past that were described in the previous section, and you have an art form that continues to look back to an imagined better, more successful time. It is unsurprising then, that histories become unreliable in dating when decline occurred because circus will never let itself be as successful as it was in yester-year. Narratives become distorted by the very nostalgia that secured success through cultural legitimacy. What is more nostalgic than imagining a brave army Captain¹⁴ who rides in after serving in the war to save British circus from the doldrums, thereby inspiring a renaissance in the entertainment? The reason such narratives matter is because they impact on how female aerialists of the 1920s and early 1930s are perceived. If circus is the largest mass live entertainment that this research has revealed it to be, then these performers had widespread appeal.

¹⁴ Bertram Wagstaff Mills served in the Royal Army Medical Corps (Jamieson, 1998: 13).

Nostalgically looking back for a more successful past becomes a reason for their stardom being forgotten.

1920s American Circus: the era of the Ringling Circus Giant

The assumption that circus was in decline in the 1920s stems primarily from fewer circuses travelling America (Truzzi, 1968; Davis, 2002: 229). The American circus' peak of popularity is stated in scholarship as 1903 on the basis that 98 circuses and menageries were travelling America (Truzzi, 1968: 315). The immediate question this begs is how popularity is defined. In hinging success on the number of circuses, it would be useful to know how many people actually attended the circus in the 1920s and whether this figure was really smaller than those of 1903. Many of the circuses that travelled America in 1903 were small wagon shows only capable of performing to very small audiences. Unfortunately we do not have audience attendance figures for either date and, to some extent, this lack of audience data may be the reason the number of circuses has come to stand in for popularity within established narratives of circus history.

Truzzi, who bases decline on the total number of circuses in operation, alludes to the weakness in his own argument when he states: 'Many circus partnerships and amalgamations were involved that resulted in *The Greatest Show on Earth* (Ringling Bros, Barnum and Bailey Combined Shows); but it must be realized that this giant enterprise grew upon the bankruptcies of its competitors' (1968: 315–6). The question is whether or not these smaller circuses became bankrupt because audiences preferred to see the grand spectacle of a giant three-ring circus run by the Ringling family or their largest competitors, the American Circus Corporation, rather than a small and shabby single-ring circus? If we read the reduced number of circuses on the road in conjunction with the largest ever one-off audience figure of 16,702 then this instead indicates a movement towards monopoly. In light of such one-off audiences, popularity takes on a new dimension and the total number of circuses travelling America no longer indicates decline.

In making his argument, Truzzi highlights three reasons frequently provided for circus' decline. Truzzi disagrees with these and provides his own causes related to spectatorship, but it is interesting that all of these events occur after 1930. The first is the Hartford, Connecticut Fire of 1944 that killed 185 people, injured 450 and resulted in compensation totalling 4 million dollars (1968: 319). The second is the

'Hollywoodization' of circus that Tiny Kline indicates to have occurred after she finished working in 1938 but by 1948, when she describes the Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus as being 'no longer the show as a *circus*. It was now a *production*' (2008: 271, 272 & 303). The last cause is the dominance of television as an entertainment that is generally regarded to have become popular in America in the 1950s. Even if Truzzi does not agree with these reasons for American circus' decline, it does indicate that it occurred well after 1930.

A secondary argument for considering this decline to be in the 1920s is based upon the phasing out of the morning parade that heralded the circus' arrival in the city (Davis, 2002: 228). However, newspaper reports announcing that the Ringling Bros and Barnum and Bailey Combined Show were abolishing their parade suggest a pragmatic reason for this decision: 'Investigations made by circus officials during the last season showed that receipts were smaller in cities where parades were held than in the towns where the parade was dispensed with' ('Circus Parade Abolished', 1921). Circus was a competitive industry and continuously sought to maximise profits – if the parade was not functioning as an effective promotional technique then it had to be stopped. Tiny Kline's memoirs also demonstrate that the logistics involved in organising the circus parade were considerable (2008, 133–8). The parade would leave the circus lot at 8am and might not return until nearly 1pm, leaving little time for performers to prepare for the first 3.30pm performance (Kline, 2008: 132 & 138). Dispensing with the parade was pragmatic: it was an expense that did not generate higher ticket sales and removing it provided more time for artists to prepare for the profit-making performance.

Circus mergers were a key strategy employed by circus owners to ensure good audience figures by reducing competition whilst minimising the costs and dangers of transporting circuses on the American railroad. By the end of the First World War the Ringling brothers were owners of the two largest railroad circuses in the US. Not only did the Ringlings own the Ringling Bros Circus that proclaimed their name and familial relationship, they also owned Barnum & Bailey's *Greatest Show on Earth*. The purchase of Barnum & Bailey and *Adam Forepaugh & Sells Brothers Circus* both appear as an early example of acquisition and consolidation. These were acquired during the 1907 depression following James A Bailey's death (Davis, 2002: 40). Closing in 1911, *Adam Forepaugh & Sells Brothers Circus* represents an early example of consolidation of Ringling

operations (Chindahl, 1959: 159). In 1919 the Ringling brothers utilised this strategy again in merging the country's two largest circus units, Ringling Bros and Barnum Bailey to create a giant touring outfit named 'Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Combined Show' (Davis, 2002: 40).

The Ringlings' key competitor, the American Circus Corporation also employed this strategy of consolidation. The company initially began in 1904 when Jeremiah Joseph Mugivan and Albert C Bowers formed a partnership to organise the *Great Van Amburgh Show* (Chindahl, 1959: 159). By 1921 when they officially established the American Circus Corporation they had been joined by Ed Ballard and had acquired the circus titles of *John Robinson*, *Hagenbeck-Wallace*, *Sells-Floto*, *Sparks*, *Yankee Robinson* and the *Buffallo Bill Wild West Show* (Chindahl, 1959: 124, 127–8 & 159). In 1922 they added *Gollmar Brothers Circus* and in 1929 *Al G Barnes* (Chindahl, 1959: 126 & 159). However at any one time, it appears that only five American Corporation Circuses were on the road, suggesting that this was the largest number of circuses it was practical for the organisation to handle. In 1921 these were: *Sells-Floto*, *Hagenbeck-Wallace*, *John Robinson*, *Yankee Robinson* and *Sparks* circuses. In 1929, at the time of the American Circus Corporation sale, these were: *Sells-Floto*, *Hagenbeck-Wallace*, *John Robinson*, *Sparks* and *Al G Barnes* (Chindahl, 1959: 159–60). This shows a clear trend within the industry for consolidating operations to ensure financial success.

Global events and their national impact provide some indication of why consolidation was a particularly sound financial and logistic decision. The Ringling brothers' nephew, Henry Ringling North, attributes the reduced number of partner-brothers alive as a key reason for consolidation (2008: 171). Although this clearly would have been a factor, world events and their national ramifications on the circus industry as a whole are more persuasive. The First World War's austerity measures, its effect on transport and associated labour shortages, and the influenza epidemic are all compelling reasons for circus consolidations (Loxton, 1997: 30; Wittmann, 2012a: 69; Weeks, 1993: 72). In 1918 the influenza epidemic had a particularly significant impact on both the Ringling Bros Circus and the Barnum & Bailey Circus, with both units crediting the epidemic as the reason why they were forced to close early (Wittmann, 2012a: 69; Chindahl, 1959: 140 & 148). Not only that, but on 22 June 1918 the *Hagenbeck-Wallace* train crash claimed 86 circus performers lives and injured many more (Brunsedale and Schmitt, 2013: 52),

reinforcing the dangers associated with transporting a circus on the rails. The global events of the First World War and influenza epidemic and their resulting national impact, alongside the present dangers of railroad transportation, made the Ringlings' decision to streamline operations into one giant circus a sound logistic decision.

However, it is the impact of the First World War on the railroad that is particularly significant because this method of transport was integral to the operations of the very largest circuses. The network of uniform single gauge track available following the Civil War provided an opportunity for these giant circuses to travel America easily. It is this railroad network that enabled the consolidation of circuses that eventually resulted in the transformation of the circus performance space from single-ring to three-ring, four-stage extravaganzas with hippodrome track and separate sideshow and menagerie tents (Davis, 2002: 22). Railroad travel was expensive and this necessitated larger tents that could accommodate higher audience numbers (Davis, 2002: 22; Loxton, 1997: 28). Although the large audiences required prevented these giant circuses from visiting smaller rural villages, they also provided transport to larger locations. Circuses would often work 'with railroad companies to offer discounted 'excursion' fares for rural residents living along railroad lines within a fifty-mile radius of a show stand' (Davis, 2002: 22–4). As a result, these giant circuses were only able to display their spectacular performances to small-town and urban audiences across America under huge canvas tents because of the American railroad. The largest American circuses were dependent on this method of transport because it brought audience and circus together in one place and any disruption would have had a significant impact on its operations.

In the case of the Ringling circus, this reliance on the railroad following the First World War is a persuasive reason for the Ringling-Barnum merger. It indicates that the apparent contraction of the industry into a smaller number of larger circuses was primarily because circus was responding to an unreliable transport infrastructure. According to David M Kennedy 'No industry had felt the wartime hand of government more heavily than the railroads' (1982: 252). The 1918 season had included disruptions as a result of rail schedules (Weeks, 1993: 72). Temporary nationalisation following the Federal Control Act of March 1918 stipulated governmental control of the railroads for up to twenty-one months after the end of the war (Kennedy, 1982: 254). This meant that government control of transportation could continue to disrupt both the Ringling Brothers Circus

and Barnum & Bailey Circus operations for at least the next two seasons. The uncertainty this created must have encouraged the Ringlings to focus their efforts on transporting one audience and one giant circus to each circus lot, rather than risking disruption of two enterprises.

It is worth stating that the Ringlings are likely to have had more support in transporting their circuses on the railroad than their competitors. John and Charles Ringling were both friends of W.T. Tyler who operated the federal rail lines. John Ringling also owned a number of short line railroads and had a number of other rail executive friends who Weeks considers to have helped the Ringling circus travel by rail throughout periods of railroad disruption (1993: 61 & 78), whilst Henry Ringling North states his family received 'government co-operation' (2008, 171). The disruption continued once the railroads had returned to private ownership, this time by prolonged strikes in 1921-2 (Weeks, 1993: 77). This further disruption must have reinforced the shrewdness of the decision to reduce the number of circuses transported by the railroad. It would also have forced their major railroad circus competitors, the American Circus Corporation, to consider transporting fewer units too.

Circuses were popular enough in the 1920s to attract audiences in their thousands that filled spaces which are the equivalent of modern day stadium arenas. For Henry Ringling North, the Ringling-Barnum combined show reached its 'zenith' in terms of size and prestige of acts in 1928 (2008, 177). The real moment of decline resulted from the Great Depression when the last remaining Ringling brother, John Ringling made a disastrous decision to purchase the American Circus Corporation in 1929. This occurred just days before the Wall Street Crash and was financed using a loan for approximately \$1,700,000 (Wittmann, 2012a: 78-9; Weeks, 1993: 219). In purchasing the American Circus Corporation John Ringling owned the largest and most popular circuses in America. This near monopoly was on a large enough scale that one of his few remaining competitors, *Zack Miller's 101 Ranch*, threatened Ringling with violating anti-trust laws designed to prevent monopoly (Weeks, 1993: 220; 'Circus Taxes', 1936). The success of the major circuses in America depended on a loan taken out when America's entire banking industry was in a precarious position. The effects of the Depression did cause circus attendance to fall and eventually John Ringling defaulted on his loan (Wittmann, 2012a: 78-9; Weeks, 1993: 219; Davis, 2002: 342). Complications with the loan and John

Ringling's muddled financial dealings led to problems with probate that lasted for ten years beyond his death (Weeks, 1993: 215–285). The Ringling Circus Empire was not only trying to weather the Great Depression, it was also attempting to negotiate its way out of a complex financial situation. Unfortunately Ringling circuses held such a monopoly on the industry that that by late 1929 they owned six out of the nine largest North American circuses (Dahlinger Jr, 2008: 385) - if Ringling Bros was in difficulty, then American circus was struggling. It is this combination of events that surround the Great Depression that mark the decline of American circus and not a reduction in the number of circuses travelling the USA.

1920s British Circus & Bertram Mills: riding the wave of popular interest

Narratives of British Circus in the 1920s focus firmly on Bertram Mills and proclaim him the saviour of British circus, describing 'the audacity of ...[his] operation' (Verney, 1978: 73) at a time when circus was in the doldrums. The First World War did provide significant problems for the circus industry. Even the most prestigious circuses closed partly due to conscription, the Entertainment Tax and the requisitioning of animals used as transport (Ward, 2014: 146–147 & 149–150; Loxton, 1997: 30). Post-First World War narratives of circus seldom describe what was occurring outside London. When they do, they provide accounts of itinerant circuses struggling to survive (Croft-Cooke and Coates, 1976: 103–111). Against this backdrop, Bertram Mills is represented as having rescued and reinvigorated circus, inspiring a renaissance that lasted until the mid-1960s (Speaight, 1980: 165–167). Rarely do any of the other circus ventures that transformed permanent venues in London in the 1920s feature in descriptions of the period. In fact, these histories would lead one to believe that Bertram Mills was the first person to have established an annual Christmas circus in London after the First World War. Closer examination of the wider circus context inside London immediately after the war and across the country in the late 1920s, reveals that Bertram Mills was monopolising on a renewed interest in circus as a popular entertainment form.

Although circus was predominantly an itinerant business in Britain in 1918, circuses did perform in permanent venues prior to Bertram Mills' inauguration of his circus at London Olympia in 1920. London had lost its last permanent circus building when Hengler's Circus was demolished circa 1884 (Howard, 1970: 140). Outside London, Blackpool Tower Circus and the Great Yarmouth Hippodrome appear to have been the

only permanent circus venues in England in 1918.¹⁵ However in 1919 circuses transformed both the permanent Royal Agricultural Hall in Islington and London Olympia venues for the Christmas season. It is these successful circuses that demonstrate how a renewed interest in circus occurred before Bertram Mills first circus season.

Circus narratives suggest that Bertram Mills established circus as part of London's annual Christmas entertainments in the 1920s, but the circus at the Royal Agricultural Hall in Islington is a much more likely candidate. In 1919 the circus at the Royal Agricultural Hall comprised of a zoo provided by Garrard Tyrwhitt-Drake and Sir Robert Fossett's Circus (Jamieson, 1998: 10). Sir Robert Fossett's Circus was an itinerant tenting circus and the booking indicates it was a popular enough title to attract London audiences. Although it is unclear if Sir Robert Fossett's Circus performed at the venue again, the promoter Stanley Wathon is linked to the Royal Agricultural Hall in circus histories (Speaight, 1980: 165). This continuity of booking agent and the establishment of a circus at the venue as a part of the capital's Christmas entertainments suggests this venue was pivotal in reinvigorating the circus industry in Britain.

In the same year, 1919, Wilkins and Young presented the *Victory Circus and Allied Fair* at London Olympia (Jamieson, 1998: 10). Narratives of circus history tend to ignore the popularity of this circus. Instead they focus on the anecdote that describes how Bertram Mills' decision to start a circus was a response to seeing the Wilkins and Young circus and feeling he could create a better show (Mills, 1967: 14–15; Croft-Cooke and Coates, 1976: 112; Loxton, 1997: 35). The suggestion in the retelling of this anecdote is that the Wilkins and Young show was an inferior production. However, it was successful enough for 122,200 people to have passed through the turnstiles by Boxing Day in 1919 (Jamieson, 1998: 11). It is interesting that Bertram Mills took over the tenancy in 1920 and reports do indicate that Fred Wilkins commenced an action for breach of contract because he had expected his tenancy to be renewed on the basis of the circus' success (Jamieson, 1998: 12). The same anecdote regarding Bertram Mills' attendance at the Wilkins and Young circus as told by his son, Cyril Mills, may reveal the reason for this. The story places Mills at the circus as a guest of the management and states that the

¹⁵ Both were established in the nineteenth century and are still circus venues today, the Blackpool Tower Circus only closes for the Christmas season in order to make way for pantomime (Ward, 2014: 122; Blackpool Tower, n.d.)

management requested Mills run a circus, stating that the venue was free the following winter. Fred Wilkins' loss of the circus contract and his failure to instigate an annual circus at London Olympia indicates the preference of the managers of Olympia for Bertram Mills, rather than the success of the 1919 *Victory Circus and Allied Fair*.

The success of both the Wilkins and Young circus at London Olympia and Sir Robert Fossett's at the Royal Agricultural Hall in Islington in 1919 may have been what led another circus to become established at Crystal Palace during the following 1920-21 Christmas season (Jamieson, 1998: 16). In this light, Bertram Mills Circus' tenancy at London Olympia was a much less risky venture because it is set against the renewed popularity of circus in the capital prior to Bertram Mills' creation of his first circus – it appears less as 'audacious' and instead as astute. It is Bertram Mills' ability to capitalise on this renewed interest that accounts for his status in circus histories as reviving the performance form. I am not suggesting that Bertram Mills should not be remembered for inspiring a renewed interest in circus, rather that his contribution should be properly situated.

Importantly, Bertram Mills also expanded his circus under the management of his two sons Bernard and Cyril beyond London, with a tenting circus that travelled the UK using the railway on a three-year circuit under the Bertram Mills title from 1930.¹⁶ This circuit was designed not to saturate markets in smaller cities (Mills, 1967: 61; Williamson, 1938: 30) and was a particularly prudent touring circuit in light of the economic repercussions of the Depression. More importantly it made Bertram Mills Circus a successful circus brand associated not just with the capital but with the locale – a circus that everyone throughout the United Kingdom had the opportunity of attending.

Again Bertram Mills Circus was not alone in attempting to diversify into markets beyond London but the circus' success was particularly widespread. During the 1926-7 Christmas season Stanley Wathon (of the Royal Agricultural Hall in Islington) began to book acts for Liverpool's Olympia and cities such as Glasgow established their own Christmas circuses (Jamieson, 1998: 22). This renewed interest in circus led Bertram Mills and other

¹⁶ Bertram Mills Circus originally joined forces with the Great Carmo under the title *Great Carmo Circus and Menagerie* in 1929. This provided an opportunity for Bernard and Cyril Mills to have a trial run at a tenting circus. In part the tenting outfit was designed to provide year round employment for Bernard and Cyril Mills (Mills, 1967: 42–49; Jamieson, 1998: 24–25).

circus entrepreneurs to challenge the more established tenting circuses such as Lord John Sanger's, with their own tenting shows (Jamieson, 1998: 27). Eventually 'The Big Three' tenting circuses of Chipperfields, Billy Smarts and Bertram Mills emerged following the Second World War as the most popular circuses (Jamieson, 1998: 67). These continued to be successful until the mid-1960s when tenting was no longer deemed profitable (Speaight, 1980: 165). In 1964 Bertram Mills Circus ceased tenting, whilst the 1965-6 season at Olympia represented the last season owned by the Mills family before the circus title finally ceased trading following the 1966-7 Olympia season (Jamieson, 1998: 116 & 121-2)

Bertram Mills is remembered as the saviour of British circus because of his expert marketing and the perceptive decisions of various members of the Mills family about when was the right time to enter and exit the circus industry. The Mills family were able to run Bertram Mills Circus during the peak in modern circus' popularity during the twentieth century; a period that stretched from the 1920s to the mid-1960s in Britain and that reached its peak in the 1920s in America. Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Combined Show and Bertram Mills Circus had the power to attract the highest profile international performers – particularly in the period of interest to this thesis. The effect this has had on circus history has been to distort the true legacy of Bertram Mills, forgetting the true expertise of Mills as a skilled and astute businessman. This misrepresentation of Mills' role and American circus' popularity due to nostalgia for a more successful circus era reduces the significance of female aerialists as popular performers and becomes one reason why female aerialists have been forgotten as celebrities.

Implications of Popularity and Decline on Performers' Careers

Not only are these narratives of popularity and decline significant in framing circus stars as celebrities, they also had ramifications on careers and contracts. The problems generated by acquiring the American Circus Corporation at a time of unprecedented financial instability led John Ringling to lose control of his circus. By 1932 he became little more than a figurehead as president of the circus, retained purely 'for the sake of his name' (North and Hatch, 2008: 225). The New York Investors became Ringling's creditors and placed Samuel Gumpertz in control of the circus' day-to-day operations, stating publicly that this was due to John Ringling's ill health (Davis, 2002: 40; Weeks, 1993: 236 & 238). Gumpertz was a former friend of John Ringling who had

professionally been an acrobat, Wild West rider and Coney Island manager. His real estate dealings gave him close financial ties with the New York Investors. Gumpertz acted as general manager of Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus between 1932 and 1937 (Davis, 2002: 40–41).

This shift in management created great changes for performers throughout this period and provides a rationale as to why I have not focused beyond the early 1930s. In the 1920s most performers would have structured their yearly engagements around the lucrative and prestigious Ringling Bros contract. However, in 1934 Luisita Leers and her parents decided not to secure her a booking with the company. In later years, possibly influenced by the hardships she encountered in Germany during the Second World War that led to her retirement due to malnutrition, she expressed her regret at this decision: ‘Well, we should have stayed over there in the States, when it then (being with Ringlings) was offered to us. Buth [*sic*] we had our property over here, and this was our country, you understand. And then, I would have married an american [*sic*] so often. And some of them I really liked very much’ (1947). Although the desire to return to Germany to secure their property was clearly part of the decision, further correspondence indicates that salaries were an important factor in this decision. ‘You see, we maight [*sic*] would also have liked to come back with the circus, buth [*sic*] ...then too we also would have needed to get some more monay [*sic*], because when we go back to Europe each year, every thing costs more now’ (1934a). Leers was not the only feature performer disappointed by the salaries on offer from Ringling Bros, although for Leers the decision to leave America in favour of Germany ultimately did lead to the end of her aerial career.

Letters from Alfredo Codona to Pat Valdo alongside contracts from the early 1930s demonstrate that falling salaries were an issue from 1931 onwards for all performers. Alfredo’s 1931 letter demonstrates tactics in negotiations with Ringling Bros that highlight a new trick he has mastered and emphasise the troupe’s mobility by saying ‘for my Circus salary I can work in Europe the Year around and finish money ahead. In fact I can make a much better average as I save money jumping back and forth from Europe to U.S.A.’ (1931a: 2). Contracts also demonstrate the Flying Codonas’ salary dropping in the early 1930s from \$475 per week in 1930 to \$450 per week for the 1932 and 1933 seasons (Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows, 1929; 1931; Ringling Bros - Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows, 1932). It is likely that the Codonas were in a better

position than most, as they were considered one of the Ringling-Barnum unit's top attractions. Pat Valdo makes pains to stress repeatedly in a letter from 1931¹⁷ that the Codonas were the only members of the entire staff being paid the same for the coming season as they had for the previous season (1931: 1 & 2). In this environment performers had to accept reduced fees or suffer the repercussions of not appearing in a Ringling circus.

By November 1934 the wider circus community was discussing how Samuel Gumpertz was trying to exercise control over performers' engagements for the winter season. In a letter from circus fan Sverre O Braathen to Luisita Leers, Braathen reports that the Wallandas tight-wire troupe are likely to be spending the winter in Sarasota. Braathen states that 'I don't believe the show will permit its performers to take any indoor engagements this winter. It seems that Mr Gumpertz is very much against it.' (Braathen, 1934). Prior to the Great Depression, performers were artists in control because their skills were desired by a thriving leisure industry. Although Leitzel's 1917 season contract demonstrates that written consent was required for her to appear outside the Ringling circus, by 1933 the Codona contracts include a full prohibition on appearing elsewhere (Ringling Bros, 1916; Ringling Bros - Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows, 1932). Not only that, but 'by agreement [Ringling-Barnum] reserves the right to transfer and place the **ARTIST**, during the term or part term of this contract, with any other of its shows or circuses – under its ownership and management' (Ringling Bros - Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows, 1932, emphasis in original). You might start the season in the 'Big One', the Ringling-Barnum Show, but by the end of the season you could be part of a less prestigious circus such as *Al G Barnes*. In fact, this is what happened in 1938 when the Ringling-Barnum unit merged with *Al G Barnes* to finish the season (Kline, 2008: 276).

The Great Depression and a struggling Ringling-Barnum circus led to reduced circumstances and less control over their own careers for performers. Not only were salaries reducing throughout the early 1930s, but performers were being asked to sign less favourable contracts to remain in an ostensibly Ringling-owned circus. The clauses these contracts contained did not allow the same level of performer mobility as in the

¹⁷ There is no year stated on the letter but I have dated this as 1931 as it responds to negotiations concerning the Codonas State Room found in correspondence from Alfredo Codona (1931a).

1920s and did not guarantee they would remain in the most prestigious Ringling-Barnum circus throughout the full summer American circus season. Nevertheless, the decision not to sign with such a prestigious circus was risky precisely because the engagements performers secured and the attendant publicity gained influenced careers significantly.

Celebrity Circuses, Performer Profile & Female Agency

Prior to Gumpertz taking control of the Ringling-Barnum circus performers had more control over their engagements, and appearing in a Ringling Bros or Bertram Mills circus shaped a career for various reasons. The popular entertainments aerialists performed across were hierarchical. American vaudeville operated big time and small time circuits and English variety was characterised by number one, two and three venues. Performers' positions within these hierarchical circuits influenced aerialists' careers and circus had the potential to elevate status most extremely because it attracted and advertised to such large audience numbers.

Stanley Williamson, press agent of Bertram Mills Circus in 1938 noted that a booking at Bertram Mills 'unquestionably raises the prestige of most ... [performers] and maintains it for others' (1938: 11). Although Williamson's book itself acts as publicity for Bertram Mills as much as memoir, the American writer Earl Chapin May considered Bertram Mills to 'offer Europe's greatest circus programs' in 1932 (1963: 312). By appearing in Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey or Bertram Mills circuses, you were appearing in the biggest and most well regarded circuses in the world, gaining status and prestige for your act whilst also associating yourself with circus celebrity culture. Having appeared in either of these circuses a performer or act was able to use this as collateral to gain future bookings and also in their own publicity (Könyot, 2015). As part of Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Combined Show in particular, if the publicity department championed your act, you would gain considerable favourable national coverage that preceded your act as you crossed the country.

This co-ordinated national coverage took the form of colourful and vibrant posters and column inches gained in local newspapers, although only the most significant performers in the circus had a poster created from their image (Fox and Parkinson, 1985 p.38). Davis has described how Barnum & Bailey Circus systematically organised advertising during the late nineteenth century using a four railcar system that pushed billposters and press agents out into the local area at intervals in the months prior to the circus'

performance (2002 pp.43–6). This strategic process, called an advance car system, was still in use during the 1920s; in 1928 it reduced to a three railcar system, before reducing to two in 1940 and one until the end of 1954 (Fox and Parkinson, 1985: 67). The process in place in the interwar period led to posters systematically being placed in the towns, cities and rural environments within a radius of the circus lot. These brightly coloured lithographic posters plastered large spaces such as entire barns and shop fronts, transforming both urban and rural landscapes. The posters included those depicting individual artists, such as the aerialist Lillian Leitzel (Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus 1918; n.d.; n.d.), alongside more generic posters of the circus. The evidence of the press agents' efficiency is still visible in the virtually identical articles that appeared in the local press of different cities to signal the circus' imminent arrival.

One example of the press agents' expertise can be seen in the similar articles that focus on Lillian Leitzel and were placed in a number of local publications during the 1919 season via the press book system. These articles appear with different titles but virtually identical body text and the same photograph of Leitzel (World's Greatest Aerial 1919; 'Girl Greatest of All' 1919; 'Greatest Aerial' 1919) – suggesting the method of placement was via press book. Press books brought together a range of press releases that were 'Locally Exclusive', thereby increasing the chances of their placement in local press (Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows, 1926). This particular series of articles tells of the aerialist's apparent decision to leave behind a promising career as a classical musician to become an aerialist, how the performer still practices music in her spare time and, most importantly, that she will be performing her act at the Ringling-Barnum circus. In reviewing these similar articles reproduced in different locations, circus press and advertising stand out as impressively organised and co-ordinated. The repetition of virtually identical articles in different locations highlights the movement of the circus across the country – the forward movement of the press inspiring excitement for the circus that fell in its wake. They also highlight the power of the Ringling publicity machine for individual artists. Leitzel may have been being used to advertise the Ringling circus but she was also receiving considerable publicity that contributed to her profile, public identity and celebrity in the United States.

In the UK it is hard to estimate exactly how circus publicity functioned due to the fragmented traces that have been left behind. Brightly coloured posters were used to

advertise the circus, although the strategy used in the 1920s appears to change throughout the decade. Reviewing the posters reproduced in *The Posters of Bertram Mills' Circus* from the UK's major public circus and private collections, it appears that in the early 1920s only generic representations of circus were depicted (Richley, 2014: 24–7). These generic posters were supplemented from the 1925/6 season when May Wirth and Captain Alfred's Lions were illustrated using a similar illustrative style (Richley, 2014: 28–32). In practical terms it may have been harder for Bertram Mills to reproduce posters at as low cost as Ringling Bros because the same artists did not appear annually, so posters were only useful for that one season. However, this is further complicated by the fact that some artists may have provided their own posters for display. Close analysis of the exterior of Olympia during the 1925/6 season reveals the Flying Codonas sheets displayed alongside official Bertram Mills Circus posters ('Olympia 1925-6 Season Exterior', 1925).

Press is similarly fragmented if you extrapolate coverage produced in the first season with that which I have identified for subsequent seasons. The press clippings book for the first season of Bertram Mills includes a hand-written note that states it contains 740 press cuttings (Bertram Mills Circus, 1921b). Reviewing the coverage in this press book, over one hundred publications are represented with placement predominantly in local London press, some national weeklies and dailies, and local coverage from as far afield as Wales and Newcastle. I did not find anywhere near this amount of coverage for the years Leitzel and the Flying Codonas appeared at Bertram Mills. From the first year Bertram Mills Circus grew in popularity, making it likely that coverage would have increased rather than decreased. Therefore, the considerable coverage displayed in the first season's clippings book indicates that Bertram Mills Circus had the power to generate significant newspaper coverage for performers in the UK.

Publicity that drew on performers' status to bring in audiences also drew upon and reflected each circus owner's public image. Both Ringling Bros and Bertram Mills Circus were closely linked to the identities of the male impresarios who ran them thereby implicating them in circus celebrity culture. However, it should be noted that their celebrity was constructed through marketing and that in this thesis I focus upon the allure generated by female aerialists' acts and public images. The importance of the circus celebrity impresario is most clearly seen in the decision by the New York Investors and

Samuel Gumpertz to retain John Ringling as a figurehead despite his being powerless to change anything in the Ringling-Barnum circus. In the case of Bertram Mills, it is evident in press and publicity that emphasises his ownership of the circus that bore his name ('His Own Horse Show', 1920; Bertram Mills Circus, 1920; Mills, 1935; Mills, 1936).

Both men became known by certain totemic images within the public imagination: John Ringling incessantly chewing his cigar and Bertram Mills by the blue cornflower he wore in his buttonhole (May, 1963: 329; 'Say it with Cornflowers!', 1937). In promoting circuses that bore their surnames using sophisticated marketing techniques, they recreated themselves as celebrity circus impresarios.

There is a similarity in the representation of Bertram Mills and John Ringling when it comes to how the quality and content of their circus titles was linked to their celebrity identities. Both these circus impresarios are portrayed as travelling the world to personally select only the very best acts for their circus. In later years, Cyril Mills added his own twist on the myth by flying himself in his own personal plane (Mills, 1967: 84; Williamson, 1938: 9). Both John Ringling and Bertram Mills are represented as personally vetting artists to present a circus programme that is an expression of their own personal high standards – to the extent that the Mills show gained the tagline 'the Quality Show'. These circuses were tied so closely to the celebrity identities of the impresarios that ran them that they represented a personal expression of their tastes and quality standards. If an artist stated they were a Ringling or Mills artist then their act also had the power to reflect negatively or positively on the circus brand and celebrity owner.

Bertram Mills Circus' particular success with the public is attributed in circus histories to Mills' skilful personal ability to create an exciting show using both international artists on the programme and through Mills' directorial role. According to Rupert Croft-Cooke and Peter Coates, 'Mills was the first in England to recognise the *tempo* of the one-ring circus performance must be accelerated. He [Mills] said that the interest of the public 'must never be allowed to flag, the so-called comic *entrées* must be cut and "padding" in every class of act must be ruthlessly eliminated' (1976: 115). Bertram Mills sought to differentiate the English circus he produced by emulating the excitement of a three-ring circus where different acts competed for audience attention. In trimming acts and paying attention to timing, Bertram Mills created a European single-ring circus whose pace and excitement looked to the American three-ring circus for inspiration.

Appearing in a celebrity circus had a profound impact on a performer's career. As a female artist there were implications to being managed so prominently by a male celebrity owner. If circuses were as closely tied to the identities of male celebrity impresarios who even had the power to trim their act then there is a wider structure through which these women's performances must be read. It is true that women who appeared at the most prestigious circuses were only employed because the male celebrity owners in power considered them to be worthy of inclusion in their personally curated circus – these circuses were a public expression of a male owner's tastes and quality standards. The myth of the male celebrity impresario personally scouting for talent or suggesting adaptations to their act, publicly places female soloists in a subservient position outside the live moment of performance. However, this is complicated by the experience of performance where the female soloist appears alone in the ring, performing actions they have authored without the visible framing of the male impresario. Within this equation there is room for female performer agency in the moment of the live encounter because they authored their act from their bodily repertoire, but it is hard to unravel clearly how audiences understood this in light of such a visibly male managed and curated event.

The issue of performer career mobility complicates how female performers appeared within male celebrity circuses. The most popular performers were internationally mobile and appeared in a variety of venues. This visible public mobility disturbs the subordinate relationship of the female performer to the male impresario because audience members were not restricted to viewing their empowering acts only in these circuses. This agency, that positions performers as having autonomy over their careers, would be more extreme if you viewed the performer as not just mobile across the venues you frequented but as internationally mobile. This directly links female agency to the most popular performers. The reality of the choices performers made about where and when to perform was of course more complicated. Leitzel may have demonstrated control over her own career when she negotiated improved terms when moving between Ringling units in 1917 (Pfening Jr, 2003: 4), but Leers' career was mediated by her agent, and her parents who travelled with her (Leers, 1936: 2). The eventual decision not to perform in the Ringling circus was pivotal in ending her career. These two examples indicate that female performers would have been represented differently in Britain and America, when

Ringling Bros imposed contractual clauses that prohibited national mobility following the Depression. The international or national mobility of female performers publicly positioned them as having choices about where and when to perform.

Career autonomy in this situation is further complicated when the female star's celebrity is significant enough to claim a different dominant position for her identity such as in the case of Lillian Leitzel. Despite performers appearing annually at the Ringling-Barnum circus but in one-off engagements at Bertram Mills, there is a similarity in how Leitzel is depicted as the performer representative on both sides of the Atlantic. Pasted into American circus fan Lorabel Laughlin Richardson's scrapbook is a cutting that describes the Iowa Circus Fans Association hosting of the Ringling-Barnum 'circus performers and executives' ('Governor Sips Punch', n.d.). What is particularly interesting is that the clipping outlines all the individuals who spoke at the event. The article lists the representatives of the Circus Fans Association before the three members of Ringling staff who spoke at the event: John Ringling, Fred Bradna (Equestrian Director) and Lillian Leitzel. Here Leitzel's role as premier artist, frequently given the title of Queen of the Circus, places her in the position of performer spokesperson alongside the circus owner and management. At Olympia in January 1922, Leitzel's role as circus royalty again positions her as performer representative. The business manager Captain Pickering, presents Bertram Mills with 'an illuminated address... and a gold mounted, inscribed reading glass, and Miss LILLIAN LEITZEL, on behalf of the artists, presented Mrs Mills with a bouquet of mauve and pink tulips' ('Olympia Circus', 1922). In both situations, it is Leitzel's role to speak or act on behalf of the performers alongside management. Her celebrity status as circus royalty positions her as more than just a performer employed by the circus.

Re-evaluating the narratives of circus popularity and decline has implications for performers' popularity and career trajectories. Reconsidering circus as popular in the 1920s and early 1930s positions female aerialists as stars who exist as part of a wider circus celebrity culture. By understanding the circus industry in England and America to be dominated in each of these respective countries by the celebrity circuses of Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey and Bertram Mills Circus, a hierarchy of bookings for performers is established. The best performers booked by either John Ringling or Bertram Mills would benefit from the considerable co-ordinated publicity machine that

Introduction

supported their operations. The circus proprietor also derived their circus' success from engaging the most popular performers who could draw audiences. In some cases performers were even willing to sign contracts with unfavourable clauses, such as those specifying where you could perform in that particular circus' off-season, to benefit from the profile the engagement conferred. If like Luisita Leers you chose not to sign, you risked limiting or finishing your career.

The 1920s and the first few years of the 1930s represent a period when female aerialists were particularly internationally mobile. Although appearing in male managed celebrity circuses risked a performer appearing subordinate to men, performer mobility presented a performer as having autonomy over her own career rather than being managed exclusively by the celebrity impresario. In the case of Lillian Leitzel, her pre-eminent celebrity status as circus royalty enabled her to disturb this subordinate relationship further, appearing alongside management rather than under their control.

This introduction has argued that there were significant areas of similarity between British and American circus as well as demonstrating areas of difference. The next chapter builds on this comparison of trans-Atlantic circus, and broadens it to consider the other hierarchical industries of American vaudeville and British variety in which aerialists performed. It moves to how different performance spaces were transformed by practice and how spatial practices influenced the experience of viewing a female aerialist's body.

1. Placing the Circus Celebrity: how performance spaces framed female aerialists

The most popular circus celebrities of the 1920s and early 1930s such as Lillian Leitzel may primarily be remembered as circus performers but they also travelled the globe to perform in other venues. The introduction has already stressed that the 1920s were a period characterised by professional mobility for aerialists and other circus stars. The highest profile performers used their status in circus to secure bookings in American vaudeville, European circus and variety during the American circus off-season. Circus spaces themselves varied greatly from the vast temporary American three-ring, four-stage tent encircled by a hippodrome track to the permanent single-ring European circus. In this chapter I examine how the variations in trans-Atlantic circuses, vaudeville and variety venue sizes, audience configuration, ticket pricing and interior decoration shaped the reception of female aerialists. This situates circus as the largest mass live entertainment of the period and aerialists as popular performers on the basis of high audience figures. It also builds a picture of how different circuses, vaudeville and variety spaces functioned differently in the UK and USA.

I am interested in how spaces affected reception of female aerialists and how aerial and other circus practices transformed these spaces. Drawing on Michel de Certeau's definitions of space and place I explore how practice created circus spaces, and how these spaces framed and reinforced performer hierarchies. This comparison leads me to modify de Certeau's narrative theory to make it more relevant to how aerialists occupied performance spaces. I argue that the relationship between pricing and spatial practices made aerialists attractive to audiences of the 1920s. The different venues demonstrated differing levels of what I term 'democratised privilege', where aerialists challenged or upturned conventional audience experiences based on performer proximity, sightlines and ticket pricing.

After setting out how I understand the relationship between space and place to work, my analysis focuses on the top venues Lillian Leitzel performed in as the most prominent

aerial celebrity of the 1920s, moving from the temporary to the permanent.¹⁸ It brings together limited scholarship on separate venues with archival sources and begins by focusing on the Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Combined Show tent that transformed small-town America into a city of circus. It then moves to circus in the city venues of Madison Square Garden temporarily transformed into the Ringling-Barnum circus and London, Olympia reconfigured to become Bertram Mills Circus. The permanent premier American vaudeville and British variety spaces of BF Keith's the Palace and The Palladium are discussed to argue these spaces represented the highest levels of democratised privilege. This last set of venues were those that aerialists appeared in as individual performers and in this section I consider how their placement within bills demonstrates their popularity, challenging the established wisdom that aerial stars dropped status when they appeared on the bills of such permanent venues. Vaudeville and variety were struggling to survive on both sides of the Atlantic during the 1920s and circus celebrities were a commercial draw when booked on their bills – a fact that demonstrates the general appeal of aerial stars.

Existing scholarship does not compare the different venues where aerialists performed during the 1920s and early 1930s or any other era. Rather than understanding these stars as existing in a variety of performance contexts, an impression of aerialists purely as circus stars is the dominant impression. Although I am arguing for professional performer mobility to be recognised, aerialists were and still are most strongly associated with the circus. Even today to term aerialists just as circus artists is not an accurate representation because aerialists appear in cabarets, add spectacle to musicals such as Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Love Never Dies* (2010) or corporate events. In classing aerialists as performers working purely in the circus, there is a tendency to group their acts into one homogeneous block. This fails to consider how aerial acts would be adapted for different performance contexts and how the venues themselves would affect the audience's experience of the performance.

Instead of comparing venues aerialists and other performers worked across, information on venues is provided within histories devoted to a particular performance type or in reference books. This exists as contextual information within histories covering the wider

¹⁸ Aerialists did perform in State Fairs, but these are not being considered because I have found no evidence of Leitzel appearing in these locations.

industries of circus (Davis, 2002; Wittmann, 2012a), American vaudeville (Dimeglio, 1973; Hauptert, 2006; Kibler, 1999) or British variety (Double, 2012). Details on specific venues are primarily available in reference materials on vaudeville (Cullen *et al.*, 2007a; Cullen *et al.* 2007b) and London theatres (Howard, 1970), those that briefly detail the theatres of an architect such as Frank Matcham (Read, 1985) or works that provide a popular history of a premier venue such as *The Palladium* (Bevan, 1952). The most detailed information on the development of the American circus tent comes from a chapter written by Fred Dahlinger Junior, who describes how the circus tent developed from a small pavilion to a tent transported by rail with a capacity of in excess of 16,000 people (2012). Dahlinger's chapter is not interested in what it would have been like to experience performances in the circus tent. Although these sources are useful, they provide a slightly skewed impression of how performers appeared and how their acts worked. In this chapter I analyse the material found in existing scholarship together with archival sources, such as diagrams of venue auditoria found in programmes, photographs, performer correspondence and newspaper coverage.

The pattern of employment circus celebrities gained was primarily built around the American railroad circus programme. The largest American circuses, such as Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey provided the opportunity for performers to appear in front of millions of people in just one season and thousands of people in just one day. Appearing in circuses such as the Ringling-Barnum circus enabled performers to become household names in America through the publicity machine that accompanied the circus, (as has already been examined in the Introduction). These railroad circuses toured America in their huge tents during the summer, which left the winter months free for performers to gain alternative employment. Aerialists were not alone in following this pattern, management such as Merle Evans (Ringling-Barnum bandmaster) and Clyde Ingalls (Ringling-Barnum announcer and sideshow manager) appeared in the summer in the same programme as Lillian Leitzel and spent the 1921-2 winter season at Bertram Mills Circus at London, Olympia. Less frequently, this winter break from the American circus provided the opportunity for acts to change or develop material, such as during 1920 when Alfredo Codona used the break from *Sells-Floto Circus* to perfect the triple somersault (Croft-Cooke and Meadmore, 1946: 64). During this winter season performers seeking alternative employment played American vaudeville or travelled to Europe, appearing in permanent circus venues or on the variety stage.

Defining Space & Place

Michel de Certeau's definitions of space and place are useful in considering these various transatlantic performance venues. Although de Certeau is writing about narrative in his chapter on 'Spatial Practices' in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, his focus is on how practice transforms places into spaces (1984: 115–130). For de Certeau place has a 'distinct location, ...[it] implies an indication of stability'. Whereas,

space is like the word when it is spoken, that is, when it is caught in the ambiguity of an actualization, transformed into a term dependent upon many different conventions, situated as the act of a present (or of a time) modified by the transformations caused by successive contexts...

In short, *space is a practiced place* (de Certeau, 1984: 117).

This emphasis on the power of practice to transform places into space in a live moment is what makes it particularly applicable to circus. Place is the stable location, such as an empty field or circus lot, vaudeville or variety venue – it never stops being that specific location. However, circus practices have the power to transform these places temporarily into circus spaces through the live activity of circus. This 'actualisation' occurs in the live moment both of circus performance and through separate everyday circus practices.

Considering circus spaces as places of practice also allows the everyday activities performed within them to be one of the 'different conventions' that made the space. For instance, the convention of erecting the circus tent has the power to make a field or exhibition venue into a circus space. This is particularly pertinent to circus in the 1920s in the UK and USA because temporary inhabitation of places by entire companies or individual performers was a characteristic of the form. Circus in the UK and USA (as opposed to mainland Europe) had no option but to transform non-circus places into circus spaces because it did not perform in permanent circus buildings.

This notion of circus practices being able to create a circus space also allows publicity, representation and spatial framing to take a central position. Circus marketing is a practice that had global and national conventions. This publicity extended the boundaries of the circus space, framing performers and allowing individuals to imagine this space within their own homes – extending the parameters of the circus space. The transformative potential of circus publicity will be examined in more detail in Chapter 5 to explore how it allowed readers to accept more muscular female bodies as beautiful. Not only that, but American circus had certain practices or conventions that designated a

performer's status through their position within the tent. These spatial circus practices indicated to audience members who were the stars – it designated who were the performers worthy of the most attention.

However, the practices of the circus and its performers are not the only practices that occur in the circus: audiences also had practices that defined the circus space and that designated their status. This is especially true when the practices most readily associated with the circus are no longer restricted to a circus bill. Here issues of ticket prices versus visibility, audience numbers, and the luxury of surroundings suddenly take on significance. It is at this point that the specific issue of the aerialist and where their practice occurs becomes important because it occurs above rather than on the stage. I argue that aerialists presented differing levels of 'democratised privilege' in the different places they inhabited. The position in the space above the ring or stage had the potential to challenge or upturn the conventional relationship between performer proximity and ticket pricing.

Democratised privilege exists on a continuum but essentially represents a moment where those who paid the most and those who paid the least are placed on a more equal footing. It is where the privileged people in the best seats suddenly have their advantage reduced by being given a similar or democratic experience to others within the audience. In different venue types the conventional relationship between highest cost and best experience were upturned to differing degrees by aerialists' performances. It is precisely because these acts happened in a space above the stage that they embodied democratised privilege. At its most extreme it is where the balcony or gallery audiences at vaudeville or variety were given the clearest vantage point of an act alongside those in the more expensive boxes. In the circus it might be no more than the ability to see an aerial act more clearly than ground-based acts because it was located in the space above audience members' heads. Aerial performance as a practice performed and experienced by audiences enabled the aerialist to represent democratised privilege to differing degrees in different performance contexts.

This experiential diversity that derives from the differing practices of the audience in relation to venue types returns me to the core questions that drive this chapter: How were these places of aerial practice different? How did national circus practices make

circus spaces different in the UK and USA? And what were the implications of these differences of practice on how the audience viewed aerialists? There are important reasons for asking these questions. It can be tempting to assume that everyone means the same thing by the term circus, but the differences between circus in the USA and UK in the 1920s demonstrate that this is not true. More importantly for this study, it allows the aerialist to exist outside the circus, allowing the multiple environments aerialists performed in to have implications on how performances were experienced.

Places of Aerial Practice

The most immediate difference between American and British venues relates to size as demonstrated through audience capacity. Both played to a fairly mixed demographic that included Prime Ministers and Presidents (Davis, 2002: 32–34; Bertram Mills Circus, 1933). In the USA venues tend to be larger than those found in the UK. The Ringling Bros and Barnum and Bailey Combined Show regularly played to crowds of 10–14,000 in their huge canvas tents, with the largest audience recorded as 16,702 on 13 September 1924 in Concordia, Kansas (Dahlinger Jr, 2012: 224); whereas in the UK, the largest circus venue was London's Olympia with an audience capacity of up to 7,000 (Mills, 1967, description accompanying photograph of London Olympia). Even the smaller Bertram Mills Circus audience figures demonstrate that circus was the largest mass live entertainment of the period. Vaudeville venues in the USA such as the unusually large BF Keith's New York Hippodrome had an audience capacity of over 6,000¹⁹ (Hauptert, 2006: 20–21); whereas the largest London variety venue was the London Coliseum with a capacity of 3,389 (Howard, 1970: 139). However, although Table 1 indicates this trend, it should be noted that the largest vaudeville and variety venues listed here, although prestigious big time and number one venues, did not represent the highest profile venues in their respective countries. Both the London Palladium and New York's the Palace theatres were considerably smaller.

¹⁹ Others such as Cullen *et al* quote 5,200 as the audience capacity but this is likely to be the original seating configuration. When Edward F Albee bought the Hippodrome he also reconfigured the stage, making it smaller (F. Cullen *et al.* 2007a, p.514). It is likely that this would have resulted in an increased seating capacity and makes the more than 6,000 figure quoted by Hauptert likely.

Table 1: Comparison of the largest venues circus, vaudeville and variety venues in Britain and America

	Ringling-Barnum Tent	Madison Square Garden (Ringling-Barnum)	Olympia (Bertram Mills)	BF Keith's Hippodrome	London Coliseum
Venue type	American Circus	American Circus	British Circus	American Vaudeville	British Variety
Location	Small-town America	New York City	London (city)	New York City	London (city)
Audience Capacity	16,702 max	1890-1925 venue: 10,000 1925-1969 venue: 17,108 max ²⁰	5-7,000	more than 6,000	3,389

The Temporary American Circus Tent



Figure 1: Atwell, HA (1925) Photograph of RBBBC midway to big top, Chicago, CWi2338, Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin

The huge temporary circus tents and reliance of American circus on the railroad distinguishes it from most British and European circus. The scale on which American circus tented immediately sets it apart from other global circuses. I discuss this to

²⁰ Audience capacity is difficult to clearly assess. Durso quotes 14,290 for the rodeo which I have considered to require a similar audience configuration, 18,500 for fights and 17,108 as the largest ever recorded circus audience on 14 April 1934 (1979: 137 & 215).

consider the popularity of circus in the 1920s and how it transformed small-town America. The scale of the big top also dictated an unusual viewing experience that required audience members to view competing action in different ways depending on how much they paid for a ticket. However, rare moments of single-focus did exist amongst the frenetic action and these are described to consider how these rare moments framed performers as celebrities. Lillian Leitzel was one of the first afforded this honour and this will be described to consider how aerialists challenged the conventional relationship between ticket pricing and sightlines.

The popularity of circus throughout America in the 1920s is demonstrated through the requirement of the largest operations such as Ringling-Barnum to transport their circuses across the country using the railroad. This enabled America's largest circus to gain the majority of its audience in a Summer season by travelling the country for approximately six months out of seven. Conservative estimates based on the 1920 season route book put the audiences gained tenting outside New York as somewhere in the region of 3,476,000. This is based on two performances per day to audiences of approximately 12,000 in a tent that could accommodate well over 16,000 people (Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus, 2008). Not only did the circus comprise the big top and its acts, it also included the sideshow, the midway (sometimes including fair-like games), menagerie tents and the various other logistic tents required to run the show. Visitors to the circus were therefore attending what Janet M Davis had described as a 'vast, temporary canvas city' (2002: 5) – echoing the description on Figure 2 below, Barnum & Bailey Circus' promotional materials from 1903. Tents were erected and struck in just a few hours, meaning that the circus could come and go in less than a day, transforming the local environment into a circus city space. This fleeting transformation was created both through its performance and everyday practices that occurred on a roughly annual basis. The temporary and annual nature of circus contributed to its status as a significant event within the local community.

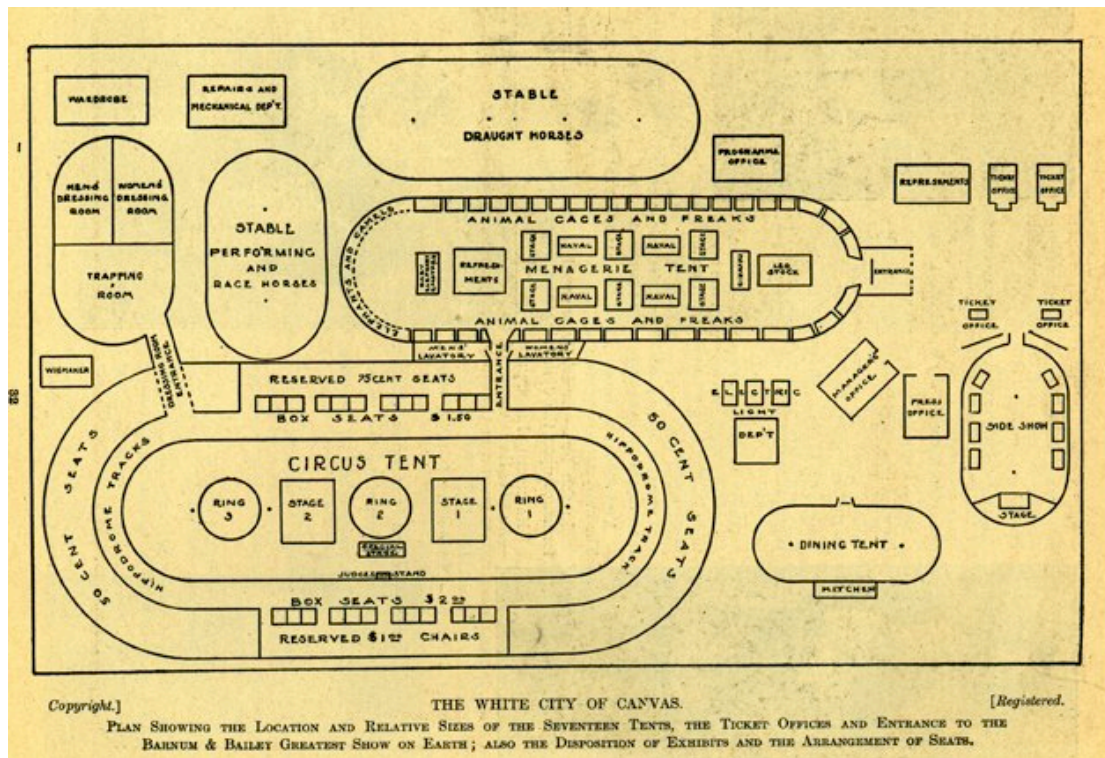


Figure 2: Barnum & Bailey Circus (1903) 'The White City of Canvas' illustration, from *Official Programme and Book of Wonders Combined of Barnum & Bailey's Greatest Show on Earth*, CWi2343, Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin

'The White City of Canvas' illustration above shows the range of tents required to run the show and also demonstrates the configuration of the big top. Although this illustration describes the two-stage, three-ring arrangement encircled by a hippodrome track used in 1903 it also points to the configuration in the 1920s. By 1919, when the Ringling and Barnum shows combined, an additional two-stages had been added to the big top composition demonstrated above.²¹ The below photograph, Figure 3, demonstrates that these were positioned at either end between the outer rings and hippodrome track. The additional stages increased the size of the tent and created a space that at its largest was 110,219 square feet – or to use Dahlinger Jnr's analogy, was nearly the size of two American football pitches (2012: 224).

²¹ Dahlinger notes that in 1914 three-rings and four-stages had been used but it is unclear whether this was a trial or was continued the following season and if the merger resulted in permanent use of this configuration (2012: 231)

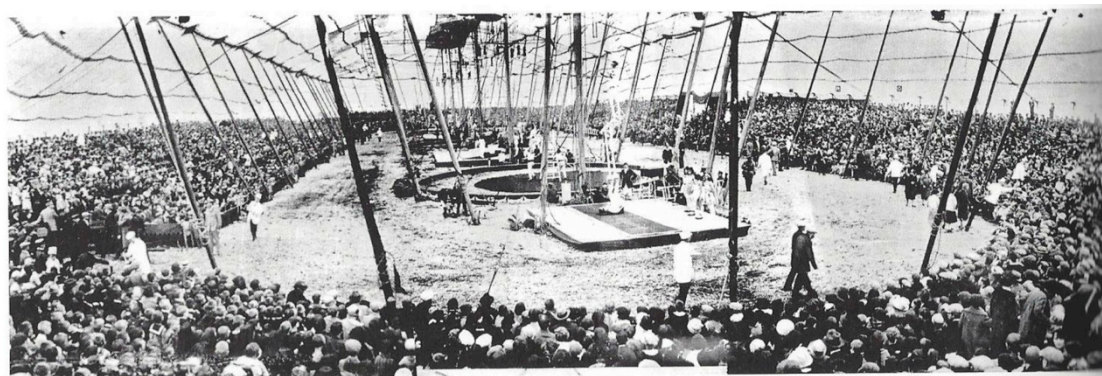


Figure 3: Atwell, HA (1925) Photograph of panoramic interior of the RBBBC big top, CWi 2337, Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin

This big top circus space alone is comparable to a modern day arena in its size, except without the ability for sightlines to be aided by the addition of video screens. This was not a space where all the audience expected to have the privilege of seeing all the action clearly. It might be possible to make some choices over what you focused your attention on but this would be dictated by the ring or stage located closest to your seat. In fact, examining the audience configuration of Figure 2 also demonstrates that to see the action most clearly you were required to pay for the privilege – and it is likely the relationship between sightlines, audience configuration and ticket prices would be similar in 1920. In 1903 reserved seating located in front of the stages and rings provided the best view of all rings and stages and was priced at \$1.50 for box seats close to the ring and \$0.75 for seats towards the back of this section. Most of seating was priced at \$0.50 and was located at either end of the oval formed by the tent. Prices printed on tickets demonstrate the lowest cost tickets had increased to \$0.75 in 1926²² but it is likely a similar relationship between high and low cost tickets would have existed (‘1926 Season RBBB ticket’, 2015). The majority of the audience would not have a clear view of the action unless they were willing to pay up to three times the price of a standard ticket. Instead most audience members would have the sort of view of the stage represented by the photograph above (Figure 3), where audience members were required to view the performance through the tent’s internal structure.

²² Discovering ticket prices has been difficult. Tickets do not always include printed prices, perhaps because they varied depending on the affluence of the area being visited. The only ticket found with a price printed on it was found through searching ebay as circus memorabilia is commonly sold through the website. Sadly it has not been possible to discover how expensive Madison Square Garden tickets were in comparison.

In order to sell both the premium box seats and unreserved seating, audience members needed to be left with the impression that circus represented value for money. Those in the cheap unreserved seating were viewing the action through the maze of poles that supported the tent's structure and against the utilitarian backdrop of the plain canvas roof. The answer to the question of value for money appears to have been to programme acts simultaneously within rings and stages, with programmes listing group performances such as the 'Grand Entry' and up to seven similar acts appearing simultaneously in what was termed a 'Display' (Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus, 1929c). The Equestrian Directors such as Fred Bradna, who programmed the Ringling-Barnum Combined Show appear to have considered it necessary for all members of the audience to see performers within a certain distance. It suggests that a certain proximity to performers was required for the audience to feel connected and excited by the circus' offering.

Not only did your location in the circus tent reflect your status and viewing experience as an audience member, a performer's status was emphasised through their position within the space. To describe a circus artist as a 'centre-ring performer' is to say they were one of the premium performers with that circus – to say they were a Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey centre-ring performer established them higher within the hierarchical institution that was circus and show business. However, there was one further rung of the career ladder that could be climbed: for all action to be stopped in all other rings and stages, and to appear as the only act in the centre-ring. The aerialist Luisita Leers performed with Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey from 1928 to 1933 and during her lifetime corresponded with circus fan, Sverre O Braathen. In one of these letters she describes her success in the final year she appeared with the Ringling-Barnum circus: 'I have the spot now for my finish here in New York, every thing is dark just the light on me, that brings the act out nice, I wanted it already all the 5 years but never did get it, but you know how it is, but any way my success is better then [*sic*] all the other years' (Leers, 1933: 3). This was an honour that was conferred only to the highest profile performers when they had earned the requisite status. Circus writer Robert Lewis Taylor claims that Lillian Leitzel was the first celebrity afforded this honour (1956: 218). In 1918 *Variety* states that both 'Lillian Leitzel and May Wirth were the headlined attractions. ... These two performers had the entire floor to themselves during their acts' ('Ringling Bros. Circus', 1918). It is unclear if Leitzel was actually the first artist awarded this honour but

it is likely she was one of the first, alongside the celebrity equestrienne May Wirth. In 1922, newspaper reports list Leitzel appearing in one of nine positions where this occurred in that year's programme ('Owns 12 Pier Mirrors', 1922). This suggests that by 1922 the circus practice of designating status through appearing centre-ring with no other action was a common honour for premier Ringling-Barnum artists.

For the celebrity acts afforded this honour, the shift from split-focus to single-focus conferred considerable status and cemented their role as celebrities. The movement from frenetic action across multiple spaces to a single-focus on a single act framed their acts as significant even before they began, and positioned their acts as those that needed to be seen and were worthy of close attention. Spectacle in the American circus was not created by beautiful backdrops but by the space filled with and transformed by circus action. The movement to single-focus therefore positioned the spectacle created by individual celebrity acts as spectacular as that of several acts competing for audience attention.

The aerialist's position in the space at considerable height also facilitated their status as celebrities. These were performers whose acts would more easily be seen by all of the audience, regardless of the cost of their seats. Those in the reserved boxes would have had the superior experience due to their proximity to the centre-ring, but those at a distance would still have been able to see an aerialist more clearly at the top of the tent than a ground-based acrobat, clown or lion tamer. This resulted in Leitzel's body and her movements being framed as spectacular as those of the vast space filled with action when her body became the sole focus for audience attention, no matter the position and cost of their seat. Aerialists challenged the normal relationship between ticket pricing and sightlines – existing as a rare moment in the programme where the whole audience experienced the privilege of proximity and sightlines in a more even manner. Aerialists with their position above the heads of audiences exhibited democratised privilege in the American circus tent. It is probable that the appeal of aerialists was founded to a large degree on the fact that they provided moments in the programme that democratised the experience of attending the circus, allowing even those in the cheap seats the privilege of clearer sightlines.

Visitors to the American railroad circus were visiting empty lots and fields that were transformed into circus spaces through the various practices performed in these otherwise innocuous places. This Circus City was one that could be relocated in less than a day and was where circus was not the only entertainment to choose from. When audience members did enter the huge big top circus tent with its sparse canvas ceiling, they paid differing prices that provided differing views of the action. The most expensive box seats provided audience members with the ability to view all rings and stages clearly and at close proximity – the privilege of proximity coming at a significantly higher price. The majority of audience members had to view the action from one end, clearly viewing only the acts in the closest stage or ring. However, aerialists such as Lillian Leitzel were positioned in a space above the stage, allowing their action to be seen more easily by those in the cheaper seats. To a limited extent, aerialists represented a moment in the performance where their position above the stage challenged the straightforward relationship between ticket price and sightlines. This moment of democratised privilege is why aerialists maintained such a strong position at the top of the circus hierarchy and why Leitzel was one of the first afforded the honour of all other action being stopped for her act. The management's decision to halt action for the most popular acts positioned them as spectacular as the frenetic displays that appeared across the multiple rings and stages – indicating and reinforcing who were the most significant artists in the circus. The vast American railroad circus was a distinctly American institution with no other country having a circus that tented on this scale.

Temporarily Made Circus

Although tenting provided Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Combined Show with the majority of its audiences by travelling through small-town America, cities also represented important locations for circus. Circuses in cities performed in permanent structures temporarily transformed into performance spaces for an annual circus season. London and New York shared this type of venue in London Olympia and Madison Square Garden. Although both used their spaces differently, the temporary occupation of these places during a prescribed city season contributed to the idea of circus as a spectacular and transformative annual event. The introduction has already demonstrated that these annual events were different: one was built on a programme that included familiarity in America and that relied on novelty in England. In England a temporarily inhabited venue meant the entire circus season, whereas in America city circus had a different significance due to its relationship to the tenting season.

Madison Square Garden

New York City represented a lucrative starting place for Ringling-Barnum and was used to generate publicity and influence performer status, despite the fact that the Madison Square Garden venue as a place dictated a slightly different programme. Although the permanent venue was more comfortable than the circus tent, a comparison with the tent demonstrates how spectacle was derived from a place transformed by American circus. This transformation is evocatively painted and nostalgically described in a cutting that appears in Lorabel Laughlin Richardson's scrapbook:

Outside in the rain Manhattan traffic ground endlessly by with scarcely a pause where small boys cluttered the sidewalk under the big electric sign of Madison Square Garden. But inside it was a different world. Harlem Negroes, East Side Jews, a rag, tag & bobtail from the four corners of New York jostled Park Avenue socialites in the corridors. A dozen languages merged into a humming background for the sharp cries of men selling balloons, noisemakers, dolls mickeymice, pink lemonade gone modern in bottles, popcorn, peanuts (5¢ outside, 10¢ within), frankfurters and colored parasols. Over all sounded the neighing of horses, bellowing of elephants, laughing of hyenas, screeching of monkeys. The Garden's roof was a maze of ropes and wires, its floor a carpet of earth, sawdust and manure. In the air blue with tobacco smoke hung an odor as unmistakable as it is complex - acrid wild animal mixed with sawdust, hemp, tar, leather and gunpowder - the memorial smell of Circus ('Madison Square Gardens clipping', n.d.).

This place was no long just Madison Square Garden but was now the sensorial Garden's circus space. Publicity generated in New York had the power to propel careers, whilst this clipping and other publicity I later examine generated from New York perpetuated the nostalgic idea of the circus space as Other both to the city and the locale.



Figure 4: (1921) Interior of Madison Square Garden circus, 30 April, credit: Wurts Bros. (New York, N.Y.)/Museum of the City of New York. X2010.11.2422

Madison Square Garden represented an important venue for the Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus due to the revenue and publicity it generated. The significance of this venue to the Ringling-Barnum circus has already been demonstrated through John Ringling's disastrous decision to retain the engagement by purchasing the American Circus Corporation in 1929. Each spring the Ringling-Barnum outfit would begin its season with four to six weeks performing in the Gardens (Wittmann, 2012b: 77). The circus was a prominent enough entertainment that some New Yorkers began to associate the movement of animals from the Mott Haven Rail Yard in the Bronx to the venue directly with Spring (Wittmann, 2012a: 78). This New York engagement served to generate good publicity for the season and provided an audience of somewhere between 750,000 and 1 million people.²³ In the 1920s two Madison Square Garden venues were in operation – the second opening in 1925. The photograph above (Figure 4) represents the

²³ 750,000 is my conservative estimate based upon the 1920 Ringling-Barnum route book and the Madison Square Venue in operation in the early 1920s: considering an audience of 9,000 twice daily, six days a week for 7 weeks (Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus, 2008). Matthew Wittmann provides the figure of 1 million but does not state whether he is referring to the venue built in 1890 or the larger venue opened in 1925 (2012a: 57).

interior of the first venue in 1921 and forms the focus of my analysis. There is some discrepancy as to exactly how large an audience this earlier venue could hold, with figures ranging from 8,000 (Durso, 1973: 73) to 10,000 (Baker in Hamill, 2004: 17). I consider this photograph to indicate the higher figure, due to the extent of the seating and the length of the performance space. The photograph shows large banks of tiered seating as well as the box areas encircling the hippodrome track and two balcony levels. The photographer's position makes it hard to estimate clearly how many banks of seating existed along the length of the arena and how it was distributed on the corners – especially as these appear to thin at the back of the oval but increase in the number of balcony levels. What the photograph demonstrates is that the smaller Madison Square Garden venue in operation in the early 1920s was a vast arena. This was the largest mass live entertainment that could be experienced in New York in the 1920s but it was subtly different to the tenting circus that it assisted in publicising.

Figure 4 indicates a number of similarities and differences in the programme New Yorkers and tenting audiences engaged with when visiting the Ringling-Barnum circus. Instead of four-stages and three-rings, Madison Square Garden could only accommodate three-rings and two-stages. As in the American circus tent, the audience would have encountered acts running simultaneously during the majority of the performance – the celebrity acts providing the only moments when their attention was focused on one self-contained act in the midst of the frenetic action. The democratised privilege of experiencing an aerialist functioned in the same way as in the American circus tent – providing a rare opportunity for those in the cheapest seats to see an act clearly due to its position above their heads. However, the largest number of acts experienced in a Display were five rather than the tent's seven, up until the new Madison Square Garden venue²⁴ was first used for circus in 1926 (Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus, 1926b). The fact that the Madison Square Garden venue in use up until 1925 was smaller than the circus tent altered the programme that was presented in New York City.

The place itself may also have influenced the programme, allowing acts that could not otherwise have appeared in a tent to be included. Biographer and journalist Dean Jensen

²⁴ The new Madison Square Garden was the first of seven national arena venues George Lewis (Tex) Rickard planned to build. The only other venue completed was the Boston Garden that opened on 17 November 1928 (Cavanaugh, 1995) and also played host to the Ringling-Barnum circus.

has stated that Leitzel's appearance with Leamy's Ladies in Barnum & Bailey Circus' 1908 season was solely presented at Madison Square Garden, because the weight of their aerial equipment required more structural support than a tent could provide (2013: 79). This support is evident in the photograph whose internal structure was clearly exposed to the audience. Not only do columns break up the space, but the girders and diagonal supports that hold up the roof and that would have supported aerial rigging are on display. It is interesting that this New York programme that differed from the tenting programme as a result of the limitations and opportunities the Garden as a place provided was used to generate publicity for the entire circus season.

For individual performers, the capacity of the New York engagements to generate publicity may have been one of the reasons that the city was considered so important for careers. As aerialist Tiny Kline writes: 'The New York appearance with the Big Show was worth more than a season's work on the road, as far as prestige was concerned' (2008, 211). In the case of Luisita Leers, the New York engagements and the success she experienced in the city must have been what led to her change in status within her first season. In New York she performed over Stage 1, but was moved to the centre-ring (Ring No 2) for the tenting season (Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus, 1928a; 1928b). New York as a place has the power to generate publicity, and change status as indicated to audiences by a performer's placement in the circus space.

As with the circus tent, the backdrop evident in the photograph of the interior was relatively utilitarian. However, the seating itself was likely to be more comfortable than that experienced in the circus tent. A description provided by Paul R Baker, the architect Stanford White's biographer, of the opening in 1890 describes the amphitheatre as:

colorful... Gold and white terracotta... decorated most interior walls, with some surfaces painted pale red. Two tiers of seats rose along the sides and three tiers of boxes, trimmed in maroon plush, filled the ends of the vast room. ...The high roof was spectacularly supported by twenty-eight large columns, with exposed steel trusses, lined with incandescent lights, reaching about 180 feet from side to side (in Hamill, 2004: 17).

It is difficult to assess exactly how the venue would have appeared by the 1920s, but it certainly would not have been as opulent as during the opening. The building was expensive to run and lack of maintenance led the interior to degrade. By the time Tex Rickard signed a ten year lease in 1920 it required repainting and repair (Durso, 1973: 11). This suggests the venue may have been comfortable but not particularly luxurious

whilst the over-riding impression of the photograph is relatively stark and functional. Madison Square Gardens may have provided a more comfortable experience for patrons than the circus tent, but like the tent it was a pragmatic design rather than one deliberately intended to contribute to the circus aesthetic. The spectacle presented at the Gardens was similarly dependent on performers transforming the place with performance rather than derived from interior decoration.

Circus publicity had its own role in the transformation of places into circus spaces. The fact that publicity for the circus season was generated from New York, combined with the vast city-like scale of the circus lot and the diverse nationalities of performers, led circus in rural environments to speak of the cosmopolitan city. The circus with its performances and its everyday practices – so different from the everyday practices of most audience members – did transform the small-town circus lot into the temporary Circus City. However, it would be incorrect to assume that circus was therefore wholly metropolitan in New York City. The circus also carried with it the nostalgic hint of small-town America. As the *New York Times* stated in 1922 ‘the circus is nothing if not American and incurably out-of-town. Even in Madison Square Garden it keeps its air of belonging to the big top tented field.’ The same article goes on to quote a circus worker as saying ‘The Garden is only a make-believe tent’ (‘Positively Not a Sex Play’ 1922). This air of small-town America was part of the nostalgia associated with the circus that was identified in the Introduction. Although this article does trouble the designation of circus as creating a city-space wherever it went, it did not transform the city into the small-town. It carries ‘an air’, tapping into that other nostalgic idea of the circus as always being outside ‘normal’ non-itinerant unspectacular society, as being peopled by Others who never quite belong. Circus transformed small-town lots into cities made strange by their temporary nature and city locations that felt oddly out of town for the very same reason.

The American circus as a travelling institution never quite belonged in the city when it temporarily inhabited permanent venues or in the temporary tent in small-town America. In small-town America it was a temporary cosmopolitan city and in New York City it held the hint of the nostalgic out-of-town. In both contexts it transformed places into slightly strange circus spaces that were circus because of the everyday circus, performance and publicity practices performed. Although different acts were performed across a differing number of rings both also used the same spatial practices that

reinforced a star's status through stopping action or positioning them centre-ring. In the city and in the locale the most significant circuses were those that also provided menagerie and sideshow entertainments.

London Olympia

The highest profile British circus of the early twentieth century was Bertram Mills Circus, that temporarily transformed London Olympia for approximately six weeks over Christmas. In the same way as circus transformed Madison Square Garden during Spring, London Olympia was transformed to become a circus space over Christmas – both places becoming associated with circus in a specific season. However, as much as there were similarities in this transformation, there were also significant differences in how circus functioned in England as opposed to America. The interior photograph of London Olympia during the 1921-2 season when Leitzel played the venue (Figure 5) highlights a number of immediate differences. The auditorium was much smaller, was configured around one central ring and is more attractively laid out than Madison Square Gardens. In the context of London Olympia, circus around a single central ring changes the audience experience, making it more dependent on a pleasant and comfortable setting despite being also situated alongside other amusements. The single-focus invites a different engagement with the acts that needed to move quickly to maintain the pace of the performance as a whole and that invited more detailed analysis of skills. The shorter, faster single-focus performance also positioned all of those on the bill as international stars.

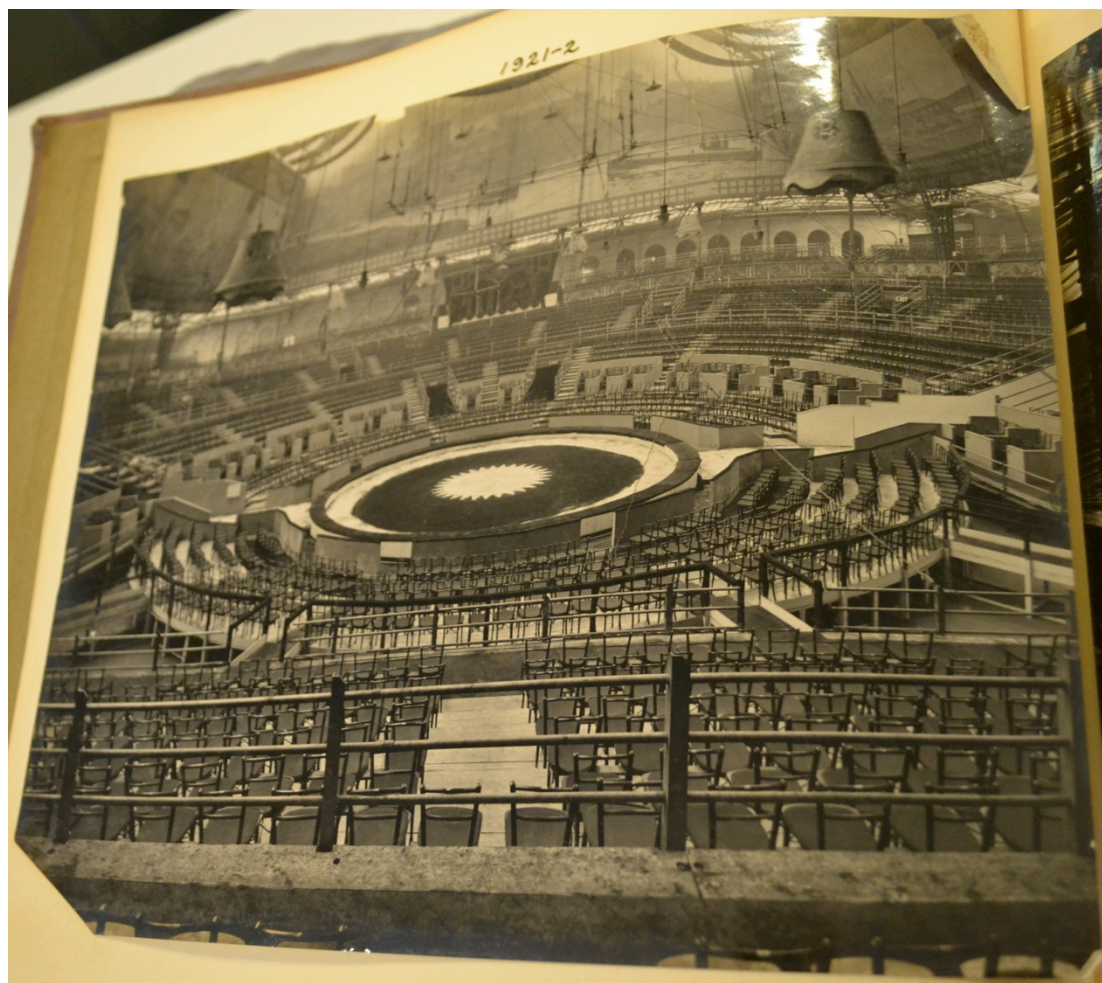


Figure 5: London Olympia interior photograph (1921-2) Cyril Mills Collection, THM/196 Box 10 'Photographs' book, © V&A Theatre and Performance Archives

The precise size of the circus space at London Olympia is hard to ascertain but was somewhere in the region of 5-7,000. In the 1920s the capacity was slowly growing from 5,000 audience members in the first season (Bertram Mills Circus, 1920b), to 6,000 during the 1925-6 season Alfredo Codona appeared with Flying Codonas (Codona, 1926: 1) and by 1938 it held 6,500 people according to Stanley Williamson (1938: 216). Later the capacity increased to 7,000 audience members according to a note on an undated photograph in Cyril Mills' autobiography (1967). Whatever the precise figure in the 1920s, this would have resulted in much lower audience figures for the entire Bertram Mills Circus season than experienced at Madison Square Garden. Taking the lowest audience figure of 5,000 performing 6 days a week twice daily for 6 weeks (note this does not account for Boxing Day where there were 3 performances a day) I arrive at a figure in the region of 360,000. This circus venue in the United Kingdom may have held approximately half the audience numbers of American circus in the city, but it still

represented the largest mass live entertainment of the period in the UK due to its large one-off audiences.

This created an auditorium that was significantly smaller both because of the audience size and because of their configuration around one central ring. Although there were some exceptions, the single ring was the convention for most European circus. However, the largest European circuses tended to appear in permanent circus buildings such as the Cirque Medrano or Cirque d'Hiver in Paris, rather than venues temporarily transformed for circus. An audience member experiencing the circus in London would expect to focus on one act at a time rather than experience simultaneous action. Most circus writers (frequently Americans) tend to consider the experience afforded by the single ring configuration as superior to the American circus with its simultaneous action (Dahlinger Jr, 2012: 220; May, 1963: 304). One explanation for this preference is that the single ring with its single-focus was the configuration where 'the prowess of the individual performer may be seen to the best advantage' (Verney, 1978: 76). This different type of audience engagement was one that was noticed by performers. In correspondence the aerialist Luisita Leers stated that 'Now the circuses in Europe, sure they have also tent circuses with one, two and also 3 rings, but people like the one ring circus best over there, people like to watch each act distinctly' (1933: 3). It suggests that the spectacle presented by performers in a single ring circus was focused less on filling the space with action but instead by an interest in demonstrating precision of skill – the single-focus configuration of the space suggesting that audiences could and would concentrate more clearly on assessing skill.

This configuration and the way in which it concentrated attention also suggests that circus artists were appreciated differently in British than American circus. In America the bill was peopled by a much higher number of performers across a longer programme. Not only did this mean that bills generally changed performers more frequently each season and were more focused on novelty, but it also suggests that to appear in a Bertram Mills' bill was a harder feat. Cyril Mills presents stars as 'but members of a constellation' in his autobiography (1967: 39), suggesting the image the Mills family sought to present to British audiences was that any artist placed on a Mills' bill was a premier international artist. The only other way in which a star could be positioned as more significant would be through the announcer's framing statements, publicity or

through ceremonial activities such as when Lillian Leitzel presented bouquets to Mrs Mills ('Olympia Circus' 1922). A Bertram Mills Circus bill was an occasion not only to appreciate the standard of skills on display but also an exclusive British opportunity to witness an entire programme of international circus stars in action.

British circus writers such as Rupert Croft-Cooke consider Bertram Mills' expertise to be derived in part due to his programming. In the same letter to Sverre O Braathen, Leers also notes that in Europe she is able to demonstrate her 'whole act' (1933: 2), suggesting that she presented a shortened act in America. This would have been so that her act conformed to the same running time as the other acts presented within her display. However, Leers may have been required to adjust her performance had she played at Bertram Mills Circus when she appeared in England. Descriptions of Bertram Mills' approach to programming his circus indicate that he considered this single-focus to require a different directorial approach if it was still to ensure that it inspired excitement (Croft-Cooke and Coates, 1976: 115). Acts performing for Bertram Mills at Olympia may have been watched more closely for the specific skills displayed due to the single-focus afforded by the single-ring, but they were also required to cut parts of their acts if these caused the pace of the performance to lag.

However, Figure 9 also indicates that spectacle was derived not only from the transformative potential of performance but also from the interior decoration. An effort has been made to hide the utilitarian interior of the Olympia exhibition centre and instead to make it part of the aesthetic of the circus experience. When the audience looked up to the ceiling with house lights raised they saw an area that had been dressed to look attractive. A close examination of the photograph reveals a cityscape and boats viewed from the water, perhaps evoking the diverse nationalities and international locations performers visited. Photographs of the space indicate this was changed for different seasons, with the 1926-7 season comprising striped drapes that evoke an idealised interior of a circus tent ('Season 1926/7 interior', 1926; '1926-7 Olympia interior', 1926). Care has also been taken over the presentation of the centre-ring whose contrasting sawdust or ring-covering provided a pleasant focus for audience members prior to the commencement of the programme. Even the placement of individual chairs rather than banked seating suggests a refined space for audience members to enjoy the

show – without competing action, transforming the venue interior decoration becomes more significant within the circus aesthetic.

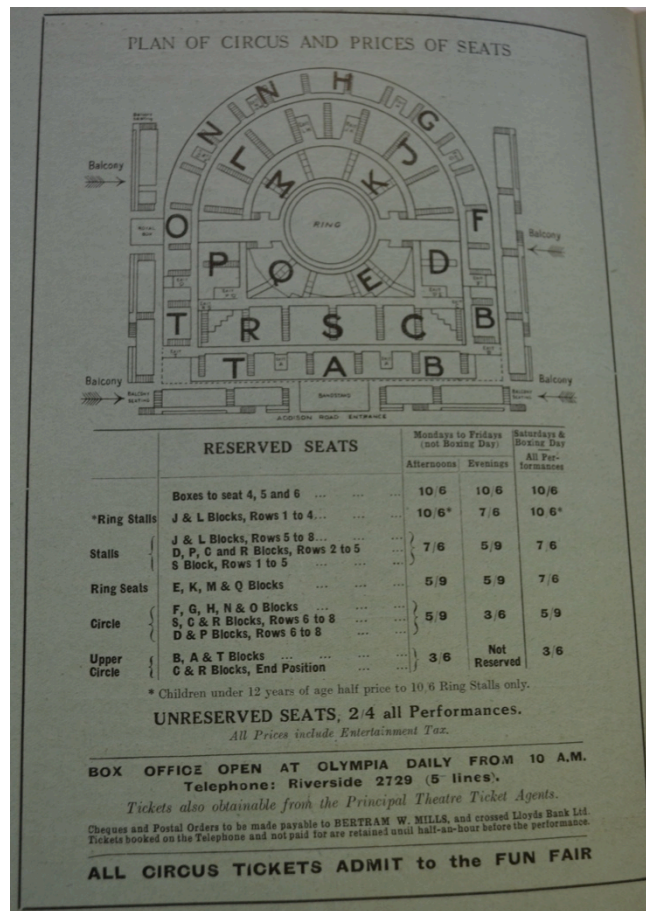


Figure 6: Bertram Mills Circus (1924) Plan of Circus and Prices of Seats in 1924-5 Olympia programme, Cyril Mills Collection, GB 71 THM/196/1/3/1, © V&A Theatre and Performance Archives

However the audience capacity and the single-ring configuration reflect a different pricing policy with regard to the position of an audience member within the auditorium. The cost of a seat does not follow the simple rule that the closer to the ring the higher the ticket price, but indicates an interest in comfort. The highest cost seating was in the Royal Box that probably included more luxurious seating. That is not to say that pricing did not reflect a concern with sightlines, but instead indicates that in a smaller space ringside seating may not have been the best place from which to view all the action. For instance, an aerialist or wire-walker performing at height might be seen more clearly from a slight distance in the highly priced rows 1 to 4 of J and L blocks that were located at one remove from the ringside. However, equally, you did not want to be at the very back of the auditorium in the cheapest balcony seats or in the second cheapest corner blocks B & T. If sightlines were the only concern then it appears surprising that Block A is priced the same as B & T. However, its location directly in front of the bandstand

perhaps indicates that noise levels may have been high. At Bertram Mills Circus the cost of your ticket reflected your ability to see every act, including those that appeared in the space above, from the best vantage point and in the most comfort.

In this case aerialists appearing in the Bertram Mills performance space did not completely overturn the relationship between ticket pricing and sightlines. The relationship between seating and ticket price instead indicates that the ability to see aerialists comfortably was part of the rationale. However, those seated in the balcony would have had as clear a view of aerialists as those located in better priced seating. Aerialists at Bertram Mills Circus did not provide moments of democratised privilege where the relationship between ticket pricing and sightlines was challenged; at most, it can be said to be blurred.

However, the Christmas Season at Olympia was not just about ensuring you had the best seat at the circus. It was also about combining the experience with other entertainments. Like the American Circus, the performance space was located alongside other entertainments. The most consistent and long running of these were the amusements that took place within the Grand Hall alongside the circus. The same ticket that gained entry to the circus also bought entry to the Christmas Fair, that included acts associated with the American menagerie and sideshow and the American midway or British Fun Fair. It was possible to see the gorilla Gargantua alongside Schaeffer's Midgets before enjoying the shooting range or very British amusements such as the dodgems run by Billy Butlin (Mills, 1967: 169, 28 & 27; Bertram Mills Circus, 1922). In fact the illustration below (Figure 7) shows that two thirds of the Grand Hall at Olympia was devoted to the Christmas Fair. In 1923 Olympia expanded to include a second exhibition space, the National Hall, that partly obscured the Grand Hall from the road. This led Bertram Mills to establish a dance hall in the National Hall that prevented competitors from occupying the building whilst it also provided additional amusements. It is unclear if this occurred for the entire season and had stopped by 1928 (Mills, 1967: 32), but it is clear that circus became associated with more than just the acts presented in the circus ring.

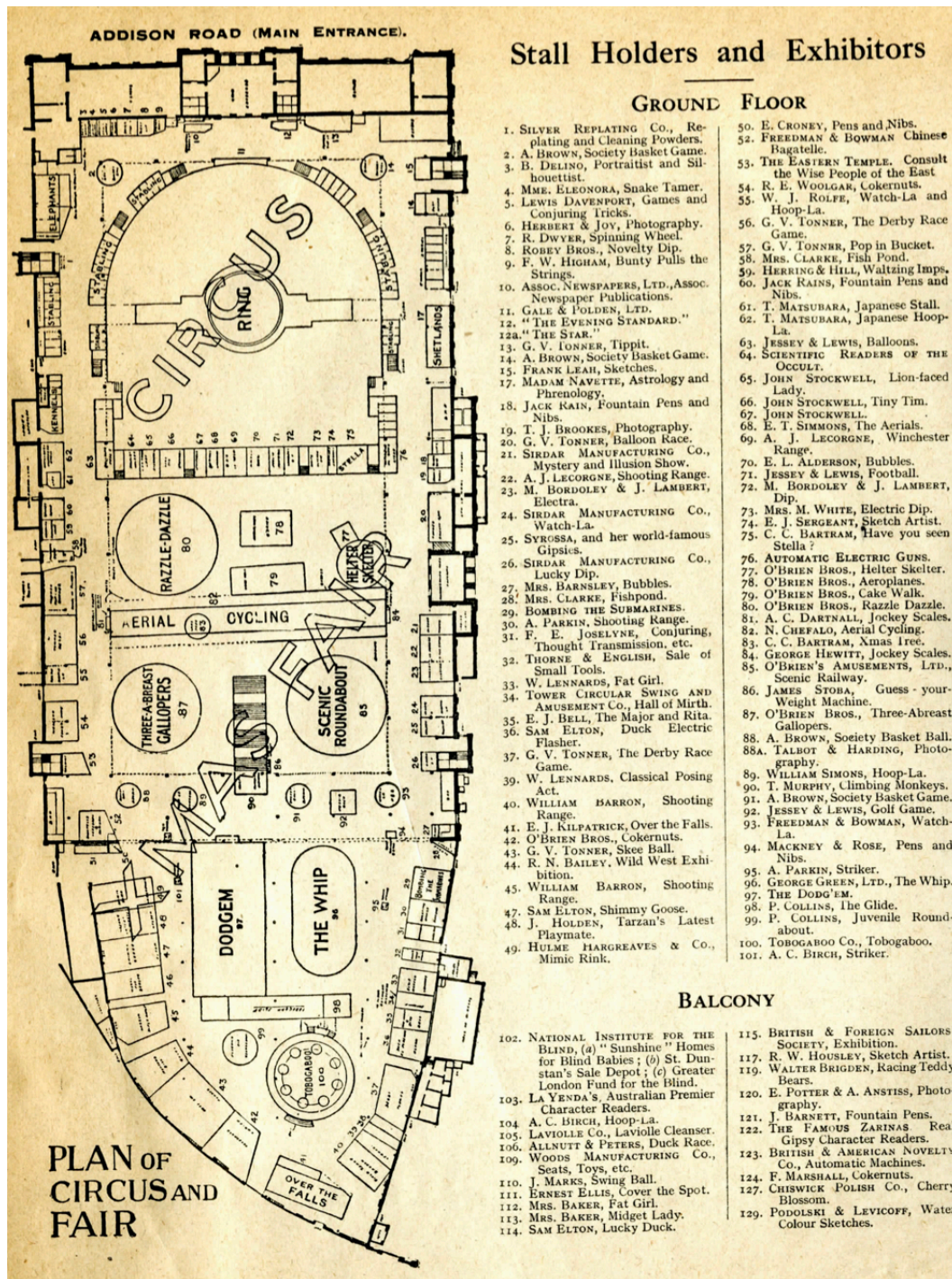


Figure 7: Bertram Mills Circus (1922) Plan of Circus and Fair from 14 January programme, MM/REF/TH/SU/CI/32, Mander & Mitchenson Collection, University of Bristol Theatre Collection

Bertram Mills created a British circus that was European in its focus on a single-ring and whose Christmas Fair amusements performed a similar role to that of the American menagerie, sideshow, midway and British Fun Fair. The extent to which circus became associated with wider amusements can be seen through the decision to include a menagerie alongside the circus when Bertram Mills Circus began tenting under its own name in 1930. (A menagerie may have been considered a more competitive draw because

established Fun Fairs were travelling the UK.) Bertram Mills Circus traded on the prestige of Olympia when travelling and it is probable that Mills and his sons felt that the menagerie was necessary for audiences to feel they were receiving a comparable entertainment rather than an inferior tenting show.

In both American and British contexts the premier circus space functions as one that is experienced alongside other entertainments and is transformed by the action of the ring – the temporary nature of the space is part of what circus means in the UK & USA in the 1920s. However, as has been outlined in the Introduction, circus was also a sensational, extraordinary and vibrant popular entertainment that traded on spectacle. Providing additional entertainments alongside those found within the circus ring served to heighten the spectacle by providing additional similar experiences that traded on fun and excitement. In America the most temporary of circus spaces was the circus tent, whereas in New York and London, permanent places were transformed to become circus spaces. At other times of the year audience members could visit the permanent venues of Madison Square Garden to experience the boxing or London Olympia for the Horse Show. These permanent venues were generally more comfortable places for patrons to view the circus. In Britain comfort was more important and contributed to a ticket price that took account of how best to view all areas of the performance space, whereas in America this was solely based upon sightlines. This led aerialists to occupy unusual moments in the American bill where their position above allowed those in the cheaper seating to see an act clearly. In Britain where single-focus and closer proximity led to a more detailed appreciation of skill from audience members, the spectacle of the circus was contributed to by interior decoration. In comparison, American spectacle relied on viewing the space filled with action except during the moments when action was halted to narrow the focus solely upon celebrity acts – framing these acts as significant and reinforcing the celebrity status of stars. In the British context where bills were peopled more sparsely, to appear on a Bertram Mills Circus bill was enough to frame a performer as an international circus star. However, circus stars did not have to limit their engagements to circus spaces.

Permanent Non-Circus Places

On both sides of the Atlantic circus performers could also be viewed in the permanent city vaudeville or variety venue if the place could accommodate their act. Those most able to make the transition would be ground-based acrobats but aerialists often

performed in these venues if the safety requirements of rigging could be accommodated by the building's structure. Like circus, vaudeville and variety both functioned on a hierarchical basis. In America, vaudeville venues were big time or small time, whereas in Britain they were number one, two or three venues; with big time and number one representing the more prestigious venues. If you were a premier performer you would expect to appear on the big time circuit in the USA or in number one venues in the UK. In comparing American vaudeville and British variety I focus on The Palladium in London and the Palace in New York because they represented the highest profile venues in their respective countries and were played by the aerial celebrity Lillian Leitzel. What emerges from descriptions of these venues is that aerialists performing in vaudeville and variety represented the strongest moments of democratised privilege due to the position they occupied in the venues and ticket pricing.



Figure 8: (circa 1910) Palace Theatre, view of the stage from balcony, credit: Wurts Bros. (New York, N.Y.)/Museum of the City of New York. X2010.7.1.1577

Both the Palace in New York and The Palladium in London had ornate and luxurious interiors. One description called the Palace:

a jewel. From the curved marble rail in the rear... and wherever you sat in the eighteen hundred seat theatre... you could see the stage clearly. The seats... upholstered in a beautiful cretonne. The two crystal chandeliers suspended from the ceiling bespoke the grandeur of royalty (Gordon in Cullen *et al.*, 2007b: 860).

The photograph (Figure 8) fleshes out this description, showing the proscenium arch stage framed by beautiful plaster mouldings and box seating stepped towards the stage. In this picture, the stage itself is hidden by a red curtain whose detail matches the ornate architectural design. This was a luxurious place for patrons to enjoy the show in comfort and was fairly typical of big time venues, although the Palace's status as the premier big time venue suggests most would not quite have reached this level of opulence. The luxury did not just stop at the comfortable seats but also included 'spacious lobbies, and large comfortable lounges and restrooms' (Hauptert, 2006: 20). Big time venues could be huge venues like the New York Hippodrome (see earlier Table 1) but were often more intimate performance spaces (Hauptert, 2006: 21). The Palace housed only 1,736 patrons adding an element of exclusivity to the luxury experienced by those who witnessed acts at the venue.



Figure 9: Campbell-Gray (1913) Image of The Palladium stage and Mr Eustace Gray's Palladium Minstrels, MM/REF/TH/LO/PAL/9, Mander & Mitchenson Collection, University of Bristol Theatre Collection

Like the Palace, The Palladium²⁵ also provided opulent surroundings for its patrons. *The Era* emphasised this in a description written in the days prior to its opening in December 1910:

...brilliant in white and gold, with seating in warm red, the house sounds the last word in luxury and appointment, and the magnificent sweep of the dress circus presents a remarkable appearance from the stage. ...The decorations are very beautiful; Rose du Barri hangings adorn the boxes, and upholstery of the same colour has been employed in the stalls, while the orchestra is enclosed by a marble balustrade. Generally speaking, the colour scheme of the walls is pink, white and gold, with coloured marble (in Read, 1985: 207).

The photograph of the venue (Figure 9) demonstrates this British approach to luxury was more dependent on marble colonnades and a multitude of richly decorated pelmets that partly obscure the plaster mouldings that frame the proscenium stage. The performers also add scale to The Palladium's stage and hint at the venue's larger audience capacity. In this case, The Palladium could hold 3,435 audience members (Howard, 1970: 140), making it nearly double the size of Palace. The same description from *The Era* also describes an opportunity for audience members to experience luxury beyond The Palladium's auditorium, in the same way as could be done in the Palace's lounges. Located behind the stalls, the Palm Court provided a space where 'one thousand persons can be comfortably served with tea' (in Read, 1985: 207). Although larger than the Palace, The Palladium was also a venue where luxury could be experienced both in the auditorium and inside the wider venue.

Both The Palladium and the Palace as performance spaces were smaller and more luxurious than circus spaces. The audience were closer to acts and in environments designed to be part of the experience. The opulence of the venues indicates that the experience of luxury was an integral part of visiting vaudeville and variety venues. It would be unusual for most audience members, who were mainly from the middle classes, to experience the privilege of the sumptuous interiors elsewhere in their lives (Double, 2012: 133; Snyder, 1989: 19; Kibler, 1999: 19; Hauptert, 2006: 21). The size of the venues also brought audience members closer to acts than in the circus tent or venue temporarily inhabited by circus. These places speak of democratised privilege when applied to aerial circus performers in particular. The privilege of intimacy afforded by

²⁵ Interestingly The Palladium is located on the site of Hengler's Circus that had been condemned by the Metropolitan Board of Works because it was constructed of wood. It was replaced by a second building in 1884, before The Palladium was eventually built in 1910 (Howard, 1970: 140).

proximity to circus celebrities would have been more extreme in the USA where circus spaces were much larger and vaudeville venues smaller than in the UK.

However, when the circus performer appeared in the space above the stage, this democratised privilege turned the traditional relationship between performer proximity, sightlines and ticket pricing upside-down. The best height at which to see the skill demonstrated by an aerialist would be on a level with their bodies. In both British variety and American vaudeville the cheapest seats were found in the gallery (Kibler, 1999: 2; Double, 2012: 134). Although it is arguable that the balcony seating and boxes would have also presented an equally good viewing experience, the stalls would not have been the best place from which to view aerialists. Seats positioned at a similar height to the audience present an opportunity for them to appreciate the aerialist's demonstration of skill in a position that was broadly level with the performer and was not accessible in circus. In vaudeville and variety venues, audience members paying the least and the most were provided the privileged opportunity to experience the aerialist's act from a similarly unique vantage point and proximity.

Aerialists in vaudeville and variety venues also represented democratised privilege in a slightly different manner because their circus performances could be witnessed for less money than in the circus. Ticket prices at The New York Hippodrome were advertised as \$0.50 for a matinee and \$1 for an evening ticket when Leitzel performed there in 1925 ('Advertisement', 1925a). By purchasing a vaudeville matinee ticket it was possible to see Leitzel for 25 cents less than at the Ringling-Barnum circus the following year. In Britain the circus was significantly more expensive than variety. Figure 6 demonstrates the cheapest ticket at Bertram Mills was 2/4 in 1924, whereas a balcony seat was just 11d at The Palladium in 1930 ('Page detailing ticket prices', 1930). Although it was possible to see Leitzel at a closer proximity for a similar or slightly cheaper price in vaudeville, it was significantly cheaper to see her at The Palladium rather than attend Bertram Mills Circus in London in 1928. The privilege of witnessing a circus star was democratised because it could be purchased for less money in vaudeville or variety.

Performers appeared above a proscenium stage in vaudeville and variety venues as the audience's main focus. Rather than appearing in the round at circuses, performers were visible from one side and may have adapted their acts to present them end-on. It is

unclear to what extent this may have occurred on every occasion, but Leitzel was advertised as appearing in a special 'Butterfly and Spider Act' performed with the Foster Girls at the New York Hippodrome in December 1925 ('Advertisement', 1925a; 'Advertisement', 1925b). Whether an adaptation to her core act occurred or not, some audience members were opposed to circus acts appearing on the stage. For the circus writer Anthony Hippisely-Coxe, the audience configuration in the round is important for a number of reasons. Hippisely-Coxe felt it removed the possibility of fakery because acts were visible from all sides (1951: 18) but that it also contributed to the audience's experience of energy and spectacle: 'The almost hermetic feeling produced by an unbroken ring of spectators sets up a reaction, not only between the public and performer, but also within the audience itself. Emotion is intensified and runs round the arena like an electric current. Break the circuit and the power goes out of their reaction' (1951: 17). This description highlights how vaudeville and variety audience configuration provided a significantly different viewing experience, one that required performers to work differently to engage their audiences.

Although vaudeville and variety venues were permanent structures, the bills themselves were temporary and relied on a fast-changing programme. In circus, performers moved across America together, whereas the performers in variety and vaudeville venues mainly moved across America and Britain as individual acts. The performance spaces may have been permanent places but the programme was temporary. The novelty that vaudeville and variety traded upon was based precisely on the temporary nature of the programme. When aerial circus performers appeared on the vaudeville or variety bill their acts provided a very different experience than the circus afforded at a cheaper price. It could include an act adapted to appear end-on framed by the proscenium stage. It also might speak of democratised privilege: a moment in the bill where variety and vaudeville audiences paying the most and the least observed the skill of the aerialist at a unique position on a level with the performer, at a closer proximity, in more luxurious surroundings and at a cheaper price than was available at the circus.

More Than Just a Dumb Show – Re-evaluating Status Outside the Circus

However, when considering how the female aerial celebrity appeared in the performance space, it is also necessary to consider their role within the vaudeville and variety programme. This programme relied heavily on comedians and singers and it is generally regarded that silent acts such as those performed by aerialists and other circus

performers, sometimes pejoratively referred to as 'dumb' acts, were low status in vaudeville and variety (Dimeglio, 1973: 35; Hauptert, 2006: 34; Double, 2012: 162). These silent acts were often positioned at the beginning and at the end of the programme so that latecomers or those wishing to get transport home would not miss any of the speech acts (Double, 2012: 14, 16 & 162; Kibler, 1999: 152). For Alison Kibler, circus contributed to the low status of such acts due to their association with animals (1999: 145). However, in saying: 'Vaudevillians seemed to be well aware of the stigma of rural circus' (1999: 152), Kibler is underestimating the appeal of the cosmopolitan Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus that was so popular with the city residents of New York. Surely a household name and circus star such as Lillian Leitzel would not be relegated to a lowly position in vaudeville and variety? I propose another reading of the situation that is based upon the popularity of vaudeville and variety in the period.

Histories of American vaudeville and British variety describe the 1920s as a difficult period that resulted in the death of vaudeville and a slump in variety. For vaudeville the 1920s were the difficult years before American vaudeville became unprofitable primarily at the hands of the talkies around 1926 (Kibler, 1999: 200–201). However this had been preceded by lower ticket sales outside New York from 1922, possibly as a result of revue shows that incorporated vaudeville acts into a spectacular production through a loose over-arching narrative and musical numbers (Kibler, 1999: 200 & 202). In the end a combination of the Great Depression and the merger of the Keith-Albee-Orpheum Circuit with Film Booking Offices (FBO) of America and Radio Corporation of American (RCA) severely disrupted the industry. This led to the conversion of the big-time vaudeville venues to show films made and distributed by RCA and FBO. This process began in 1928 when Joseph P Kennedy gained a major share in the Keith-Albee-Orpheum circuit and was completed in 1930 when Radio-Keith-Orpheum (RKO) was formed (Kibler, 1999: 201). The conversion of the most significant American vaudeville chain into film theatres demonstrates the state of vaudeville in the 1920s and was an instrumental factor in the demise of the vaudeville industry.

However, the 1920s represented no more than a slump for British variety. In Britain, in the 1920s variety did suffer competition from film, revues and radio (Double, 2012: 46–49 & 52). British variety rallied partly as a result of a few changes aimed at increasing the pace of the programme, in much the same way that Bertram Mills had begun to increase

the pace of the circus programme at Olympia in the early 1920s. George Black, a director of the General Theatre Company who owned The Palladium, masterminded these changes in partnership with his general manager Val Parnell who had previously attempted to increase the pace of variety in provincial venues (Bevan, 1952: 73). Black and Parnell sought to create a faster programme by trimming acts and eliminating the long stage pauses between routines that had distinguished British variety from American vaudeville (Double, 2012: 53–55). In fact, this style of variety was known as both ‘high speed variety’ and ‘American-style’ (Double, 2012: 54–55). Although British variety did rally and retained its popular status until around the 1960s, it is clear that the 1920s were a tricky period where renovation was required.

Understanding the 1920s as a period when vaudeville and variety were struggling puts the performances of circus stars such as aerialists in a different light to the one suggested by Kibler, where there was a stigma attached to being a circus artist appearing in vaudeville. As has already been demonstrated in the Introduction, circus was thriving in this period on both sides of the Atlantic and this made the highest profile circus performers a significant commercial draw. The opportunity to see the stars of Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus in Britain appears to have been eagerly anticipated by *The Observer* during the 1928–29 Christmas season:

As New York’s circus fever is not contracted until the spring, when our attack leaves off, the stars of the “World’s Greatest Show and Greatest Shows on Earth” are in London now. Con Colleano can be seen at Olympia, and May Wirth will be seen at the Palladium this week. The third is Lillian Leitzel, probably the most expert performer on the ropes and rings the world has known, who was at the Palladium last week. The programme calls her a “trapeze artist,” but that is a mistake. Her feats have little in common with Tamara’s incomparable skill on the swinging bar at Earl’s Court. While Tamara is a prodigy of static balance, Leitzel is a marvel of dynamic whirls. Hanging by one hand from a rope she throws her body over and over in several ways until she resembles a human Catherine wheel. Without a pause she executes over fifty of these aerial somersaults until we seem to lose our breath merely watching her (‘Palladium’ 1929).

This suggests that circus celebrities did not simply drop status when they appeared in British variety. An article in the *Duluth News-Tribune* also lists Leitzel as one of 87 ‘celebrities’ who had appeared at the Duluth Orpheum in its eleven year history, confirming that Leitzel still retained star status in American vaudeville (‘Celebrities’ 1921). Instead circus performers could represent a significant booking and commercial draw if their circus celebrity made them a known name.

The most significant booking of all the circus artists listed in *The Observer* was the silent performance provided by Lillian Leitzel. The article itself is titled 'Palladium: Lillian Leitzel' and spends the majority of time highlighting her act and explaining how it is different from the skill displayed by the Russian artist Tamara. Although the first performance of 'American-style' variety at The Palladium on 3 September 1928 is credited as being a success, Black and Parnell had given themselves six months to test the new approach (Bevan, 1952: 94). Leitzel first appeared at The Palladium on 31 December 1928, placing her booking within this period. This coverage situates her booking as part of the wider strategy to reinvigorate variety at The Palladium. This strategy relied on securing high profile acts and that included the booking of film stars such as Jackie Coogan, who appeared as the waif in Charlie Chaplin's *The Kid* (Bevan, 1952: 90). In this light, the booking of Leitzel was that of a recognisable international star name from the largest live mass entertainment of the period. Leitzel's act may have been silent, but this dumb show carried with it a celebrity status acquired in circus that equated to wider appeal to the British general public.

What is also interesting is that the wire-walker, the equestrian and the aerialist acts are clearly designated as circus by *The Observer*. The practice of aerial performance at The Palladium invoked circus rather than variety. Despite the fact that aerialists had been performing for generations in permanent theatrical venues such as the nineteenth century music halls, Leitzel's aerial practice had become one associated predominantly with the circus. It raises the question of exactly when this perceptual connection between aerialists and the circus occurred. It is possible that the 1920s could have been the time when the aerialist became most strongly associated with the circus. It is logical that if vaudeville and variety were struggling in the 1920s, that aerialists would be more closely associated with the more popular performance form they appeared within – a connection they may have sought to exploit themselves.

Lillian Leitzel was an international star and her celebrity gained her a prominent position in variety and vaudeville. Although this discussion complicates the established wisdom most extremely articulated by Kibler that silent circus acts became low status when they appeared in vaudeville and variety, it does rely on acts carrying with them the cachet of having worked in the most prestigious circuses. Less well-known acts may not have been able to make this transition as successfully, despite the waning popularity encountered by

both national industries that led to American vaudeville's eventual demise and to the reinvigoration of the British variety format.

Conclusion: Transformative Practices

Circus as a term suggests a circular performance space created by the practice of the equestrian trick rider, but this discussion has destabilised such an easy definition. The most popular and prestigious circuses on both sides of the Atlantic comprised more than just the circular ring. In the 1920s both American and British circus meant performance spaces that were unconventional in that the practices of circus temporarily transformed these specific places into circus spaces. The performance of circus practices also had the power to bring together other amusements under the wider umbrella term. The scale of these venues and the audiences that saw them in a single performance or in a season reinforces the scale and popularity of the circus industry and the stars that it created.

Circus was a global entertainment in the 1920s but national conventions existed that created different experiences for audience members. In America the movement from multiple to single-focus and circus practices related to celebrity acts maintained and reinforced their status as the most important acts to be experienced. In Britain the experience of single-focus was the only viewing experience, inviting a more detailed appreciation of skill on a smaller bill. What linked these nationally defined circuses were the core circus practices that transformed places into circus spaces. Certainly by the late 1920s aerial practice was strongly associated with the circus despite performers working within other industries such as vaudeville and variety. It is unclear exactly when aerial performance became a practice associated most strongly with the circus but it is probable that the faltering popularity of vaudeville and variety in comparison to circus in the 1920s is responsible for this perceptual connection. The booking of Lillian Leitzel at The Palladium as part of a strategy to reinvigorate variety demonstrates the popular status of circus celebrities was widespread and extended beyond the circus enthusiasts who watched at the ringside.

The location of circus spaces as places also points to a characteristic in circus celebrity that differed between America and Britain: in America, the circus star was an international celebrity participating in a local event whether that occurred in small-town America or the city; whereas in Britain, the circus star in the 1920s was an international celebrity appearing in London as part of the capital's Christmas entertainments. At

Bertram Mills Circus presence on the bill was enough to indicate star status, demonstrating a less visibly hierarchical circus structure in Britain than in America – the hierarchical circus structures more apparent in the allegedly classless American society. Particularly in the USA where the circus took the city to the small-town and a whiff of the out-of-town to the city, this ambivalent spatial relationship contributed to the nostalgic association of the circus as never quite belonging – as an exotic Other.

A key reason aerialists were such good candidates for circus celebrity was due to their location in the space above and how this enabled them to challenge conventions regarding ticket pricing. Aerialists ability to be seen from all seats within the tent or Madison Square Garden venue represented a moment of democratised privilege within the American circus bill. In Britain where the only experience was single-focus, their position above provided good viewing experiences for those in the cheapest balcony seating, blurring the relationship between ticket pricing, sightlines and proximity. In vaudeville and variety venues the conventional relationship between ticket pricing and performer proximity was completely upturned. This was the one time in the programme where those seated in the gallery, balcony and boxes were all provided with a similar opportunity to see circus artists in detail at a level and proximity inaccessible in the circus – representing the strongest expression of democratised privilege.

This chapter has explored the transformative potential of circus disciplines to transform places into spaces through practice. In the 1920s and early 1930s aerial performers were considered glamorous stars. The next chapter shifts the mirrors surrounding these stars so that they focus more closely on aerial practice for the first time, expanding on the transformative nature of practice to explore how aerial action cast a glamour over audience members.

2. To Glamour: Glamour, Circus & the Female Aerialist

Glamour in the 1920s and early 1930s was a daring articulation of femininity that relied on danger and a strong attitude. The female aerialist was a performer whose skilful acts balanced muscular strength with grace, demonstrating an expression of femininity that aligns with glamour: her bold strength underpinning the gracefully feminine movements she performed as she hovered dangerously in a space above the audience's heads. The experience of watching an aerialist perform inspires an imaginative audience experience that plays with distance, provokes fantasy and relies on a complex representation of femininity. In this chapter I argue that experiencing aerial performance is to engage in a fiction of transformation that makes aerialists glamorous. Interrogating how female aerialists' glamour functioned makes it possible to draw new conclusions about glamour itself.

Female aerial performers of the 1920s and early 1930s were glamorous international celebrities performing in a period when circus was the most popular mass live entertainment in America and Britain. The practices they performed contributed to the transformation of venues into circus performance spaces, but aerial performance was also a transformative experience that was central to the glamour of the most affluent circuses. Female aerialists have been forgotten not only as celebrities at the top of the circus hierarchy (Kline, 2008: 118), but also for what they reveal about glamour. It is a common assumption that only film stars of the period were glamorous, yet by reconsidering the circus as a popular entertainment other stars become capable of revealing more about glamour. Hollywood was the largest mass recorded entertainment of the 1930s and its stars are considered to represent the embodiment of glamour and, as the largest live mass entertainment of the 1920s circus also influenced the concept. Like film, circus displayed representations of femininity to the masses, but these were representations that were different because they included demonstrations of strength. In this chapter I explore how female aerialists and their performances were glamorous and what this tells us about female performers' glamour in the 1920s. The transformative power of glamour created by aerialists was key in transforming their acts of strength into acts of femininity.

In investigating how aerial performers embodied glamour I orientate the mirrors to focus more closely on the movements of the aerialists who fascinate me. This introduces concepts that will be picked up and explored in further detail in subsequent chapters: ideas of risk, celebrity, showmanship²⁶ and the performance of femininity. Glamour has only recently received academic attention, so this discussion begins by discussing the etymology of the word glamour and limited scholarship to explore how the relationship between concept and aesthetics functions. Glamour has been expressed and understood differently in different eras and a brief discussion of the flapper or modern girl serves to historicise the expression of glamour in the 1920s – evidencing that in this era it relied on a complex representation of gender attributes. The transformative and imaginative nature of glamour is connected to distance and desire. The next section explores how the practice of aerial performance is transformative because it evokes the desire to fly through weightlessness. The theories of Peta Tait and Susan Foster are used to demonstrate that watching aerial performance is an experience that plays with distance, where the individual uses their perception of their own body in a process of imagining that I describe as a kinaesthetic fantasy. The performances of the aerial celebrity, Lillian Leitzel, will be used to examine how distance was collapsed and reinstated within the core elements of her act. Leitzel epitomised aerial glamour in the 1920s not just because of the transformative potential of her aerial action, but also through the construction of her act and her assertive performance style. Glamour may be represented through surfaces but the following section that unpicks the term demonstrates how it additionally relies on a bold magnetic personality.

Unpicking Glamour

Film stars of the 1920s and early 1930s such as the film star flapper or modern girl, Clara Bow, are readily associated with the term yet glamour is a complex concept. Usage of the term has changed and developed over time, taking on associations with glam rockers of the 1970s and the naked display of glamour girls from the 1950s (*OED*, 2014b). The question is then what is ‘glamour’ and how has the term been used? Although it is used widely, it is only in the last twenty years that there has been any serious academic consideration of the term. Merriam-Webster’s *Third New International Dictionary* provides

²⁶ I use the term ‘showmanship’ because it is an element of circus expertise in audience engagement utilised by both men and women. I do so wishing to build upon the gender neutral associations present in the term aerialist. Although showmanship does involve utilising the specific benefits of gender, to describe women as having ‘show-womanship’ risks diminishing their expertise because it suggests their skills should only be measured against other women.

an indication of common American usage and describes glamour as: ‘an elusive, mysteriously exciting and often illusory attractiveness that stirs the imagination and appeals to a taste for the unconventional, the colorful, the unexpected or the exotic’ (1993). Even this superficial description provides immediate parallels to the female aerialist and the circus through describing the emotions of excitement, the stirring of the imagination, experience of wonder, colour and the exotic.

Interrogating the origins of the word begins to add depth to an understanding of the term. Stephen Gundle and Clino T Castelli provide a more detailed analysis of the etymological roots of the word glamour, but what emerges from the etymology is a term that has developed from two separate strands (2006: 2–6). The first strand comes from a corruption of ‘grammar’ and provides a magical element. The word grammar ‘denoted the methodical study of literature’ and in the middle ages came to refer to learning in general. The knowledge acquired through this learning was thought to include magic and astrology and was restricted to the learned classes (*OED*, 2014d). This root has also given rise to the old French ‘gramaire’, meaning ‘book of spells’ and which itself has come to be corrupted as the word ‘grimoire’ (Gundle and Castelli, 2006: 4). The root ‘grammar’ then provides the magical element in glamour that is only accessible to the initiated few.²⁷ It is then possible to use glamour as a verb, ‘to glamour’ someone is to place them under an enchantment (*OED*, 2014c). The etymological root grounded in the word grammar is what makes glamour spell-like and provides it with its darker qualities that are often considered dangerous, transgressive and exclusive. The second etymological root of the word links glamour with ‘splendour’ and ‘clamour’ (Gundle and Castelli, 2006: 4). This strand takes the term from a secret private world to that of the public, where glamour demands to be looked at in its loudness, boldness and showiness. This loud insistence that glamour be looked at links it to the performance mediums of film, theatre and particularly circus, through representation’s bold, bright and showy displays (Gundle, 2008: 10). Gundle & Castelli indicate a link between these strands in that one relates to knowledge and the other to its bedazzling and wondrous effects (2006: 4).

²⁷ In his separately authored book on the history of glamour, Gundle explores the Scottish etymological root drawing similar conclusions due to its first literary use in *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* by Sir Walter Scott (2008: 37).

The relationship between knowledge and effect is not explicitly linked within Gundle & Castelli's work. The book exists in two separately authored parts: the first by Gundle considers the historical roots of the term and the second, by Castelli, considers the visual language of glamour. Although the relationship between concept and aesthetics is never clearly articulated here or in other works, I consider them to function in an iterative relationship. The concept finds expression in the effects that produce the bold aesthetics on which the concept relies – as the concept shifts, so do the aesthetics and as the aesthetic shifts, so does the concept. The dependent relationship between concept and aesthetics has led glamour to contain a core aesthetic that has included furs and glittering surfaces, but that has shifted within different eras. To some extent this accounts for the changes in the perception of glamour as the aesthetic comes to take on different connotations in different eras.

This iterative relationship is what has led different authors to establish slightly different timelines for glamour and slightly different aesthetics. Most scholars consider the roots of glamour to have developed most strongly throughout the nineteenth century (Gundle and Castelli, 2006; Gundle, 2008; Brown, 2009), whereas Virginia Postrel contends the concept has always existed (2013: 137–222). Postrel argues that people or objects are glamorous when they express an individual's unarticulated desires through images that provide space for dreams of transformation (2013). However, her argument fails to acknowledge the full significance of commodity culture in glamour, despite the fact she considers the 1930s the epitome of glamour due to mass media and the progressive promise of modernity (Postrel, 2013: 172). For Judith Brown the 1940s mark the end of Hollywood glamour, whereas Carol Dyhouse analyses contemporary usage of the word to establish a modern idea of glamour as developing from 1900 before reaching its epitome in Hollywood glamour of the 1930s to 1950s (2011). For Dyhouse then, the 1920s represent a key period in the development of Hollywood glamour and for this reason provide a particularly interesting period for consideration.²⁸ I consider the different timelines of importance and aesthetics defined by authors to be somewhat arbitrarily based on what the individual author considers to be 'glamorous', and it is this subjectivity that has led glamour to be so difficult to define (Baker, 2016: 8; Postrel, 2013: 19). As such, I highlight the same subjectivity in my nostalgic designation of the

²⁸ Both Dyhouse (2011) and Gundle (2008) chart the shifts in the meaning and significance of glamour throughout the twentieth and into the early twenty-first century.

1920s and early 1930s as a glamorous era on the basis of the alluring images of feminine assertiveness, that conform to glamour's dependence on a bold personality that will be identified later in this section.

An example of where definitions of aesthetics diverge within scholarship reveals how the Other functions in glamour. Gundle & Castelli place an emphasis on orientalism where glamour is an appropriation of the aesthetics of an Other by white performers; whereas Brown focuses on primitivism considering that it can be the demonstration of an Other culture to the dominant culture through performances such as those of the African-American dancer, Josephine Baker (2009: 121–144). Although this does raise questions about whether the Other has to be an authentic Other, both identify exoticism as key. This points to the distance that exists within glamour: the glamorous is always Other and it is precisely this distance that helps stimulate interest and engagement (Gundle, 2008: 15; Postrel, 2013: 20). Usage of the term glamorous indicates this distance: 'you look glamorous' rather than 'you are glamorous'. Intimate knowledge of the individual being described means knowing too much about the realities of their life to consider them to truly embody glamour. This identification of a separate Other in glamour highlights the distance in the concept and that it is never truly owned by the self.

Almost all writers, however, consider glamour to be closely tied to consumerism to the extent that Brown describes it as an 'experiential site of consumer desire, fantasy, sexuality, [and] class' (2009: 1). It is linked to modernity through a society with more fluid social systems, where individuals were no longer governed by the aristocracy (Gundle and Castelli, 2006: 7; Dyhouse, 2011: 205; Gundle, 2008). Wilson and Postrel stand out in considering glamour not to be linked to consumption. As has been demonstrated above, Postrel's argument is suspect, whilst Wilson's requires stronger support because she still considers glamour to be about power and fashion once it became separated inherited authority (2007: 98 & 97). Gundle persuasively considers glamour to have begun 'precisely as a refashioning for new times and new purposes of the exterior glitter that the nobility had sought to reserve to itself to affirm its social and economic superiority' (2008: 27). The use of aristocracy's glitter to confirm current social standing through glamour exists as a form of nostalgia where high social standing could be accurately and easily assessed according to the exterior signs of wealth. Modernity is linked to glamour through desire as it allowed individuals to wish for a different more

privileged position in life, that modernity suggested could be within their grasp due to less rigid social structures. This privileged position is characterised by affluence, leisure and the commodities that wealth allows the individual to buy. This prosperity is represented through an aesthetic that is excessive, luxurious, exotic and makes use of oriental influences, bright glittering surfaces, bold colours, rich fabrics, feathers, furs and flawless made up faces. All of these surfaces can be purchased and with them the fleeting promise of transformation into a glamorous person.

What is interesting is that glamour is not just about purchased surfaces such as furs, feathers or rich, luscious fabrics. Glamour is predominantly, but not exclusively feminine, and is linked to a magnetic personality. Gundle considers the gendered nature of glamour to be rooted in the courtesan's use of wealth to appropriate status (2008: 11), later explaining that as 'luxury objects and status symbols' the same courtesans conferred status on the men who kept them, without those men having to display the 'outward signs of wastage' themselves (2008: 92). Such a historical description demonstrates how glamour has been gendered as feminine but has the potential to transform both men and women through the glorifying potential that the exterior signs of wealth can confer. It also accounts for why sex appeal and sex are such an important part of glamour.

However, again there is a divergence in scholarship as to what constitutes this magnetic personality or if it is even required. Postrel contends in an argument that rightly questions where glamour lies, that objects can be glamorous, although I find myself ultimately finding the cited view of Grant McCracken that objects act as 'bridges' to glamour more persuasive (2013: 43). For Dyhouse, Jacobowitz and Lippe, and Brown, it is tied to a celebrity presence but this is characterised slightly differently. In the case of Brown, the epitome of a glamorous celebrity is Greta Garbo, whose cool and inaccessible persona aligns with the clean lines and abstraction of modernity (2009: 101–120). Brown considers inaccessibility as an alluring absence that relates to the distance in both glamour and celebrity. Wilson also considers glamour to be characterised by inaccessibility, describing 'untouchability' as what distinguishes glamour from celebrity (2007: 100 & 105). It is interesting that none of the scholars who consider glamour and who draw direct links to celebrity have linked it explicitly to theories of celebrity that explore the role of distance. I explore what distinguishes glamour from celebrity in Chapter 3. Even Wilson, who considers glamour to be separate from celebrity, fails to

consider the links between the role of distance in celebrity and glamour theory, leaving her argument regarding the inaccessibility of glamour open to dispute (2007).

In opposition to Brown and Wilson, Dyhouse identifies glamour to be linked to an attitude and relates it to celebrity in the 1920s through the magnetism that Elinor Glyn identified in the quality of 'It' that some charismatic people embodied. Dyhouse also links glamour to celebrity through the stereotype of the modern girl through stars such as Clara Bow and Louise Brooks (2011: 15–18 & 56–58). Dyhouse's interpretation acknowledges a debt to Jacobowitz and Lippe's brief work that emphasises the progressive potential of glamour, an allure they consider to be characterised by 'confidence, empowerment, and, depending on its uses, articulates all that is *not* domestic, confined, suppressed' (1992: 3, italics in original). The length of Jacobowitz and Lippe's article does not give scope for a developed analysis of the role of gender in female glamour; but they consider images of Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich to describe the feminine through a juxtaposition of feminine aligned aesthetics, such as tactile textures and softness, with masculine cuts and shiny leather surfaces (1992: 4). This indicates that the power in glamour in the interwar period relied on combining the female form with attributes traditionally considered masculine.

The problem with Brown's interpretation and Wilson's wider argument is that if glamour is purely characterised by a cold abstraction then surely it can only repel. Glamour is alluring because it relies on the apparent contradictions of both warmth and distance: it is 'accessible exclusivity, democratic elitism', 'sleazy and elite' 'accessibility and distance' (Gundle, 2008: 12; Baker, 2016: 11; Postrel, 2013: 20). Brown may read hard reflective surfaces as inaccessible, but Ann Anlin Cheng persuasively argues that reflective surfaces offer something alluring. She considers 'A shimmering surface beckons us to plunge into a flat and reflective interiority' when analysing the interwar film performance of Anna May Wong (2011: 1030). In fact, the shine of reflective surfaces is identified in the 1920s as key to the transformative nature of glamour because it has the power to reflect the audience, troubling the comfort of gazing on the glamorous subject as object because it places the audience within the display (Cheng, 2011: 1027). Glamour simultaneously pulls one in with its warmth whilst preventing one from ever actually gaining purchase – it is alluring precisely because glamour never fully repels and never fully attracts, instead it tantalisingly collapses and immediately reinstates the distance between you and it.

Pulling all the strands of this discussion together, I form a fuller idea of how glamour functions in terms of concept and aesthetic surface. Glamour requires the separate subject to inhabit the public sphere by presenting a bold and confident personality for consumption by an audience. The persona displayed must include elements of power, danger, transgression, exoticism and must be sexually desirable – a desirability that often included the mixing of traditional gender attributes within female stars during the interwar period. It must be the boldest expression of what the viewer would desire to be, hovering on the exciting cusp of respectability; and ultimately it must be Other to the viewer. It locates the subject in an exclusive position that provides them with the power to enchant and the boldness to be themselves without any inhibitions. The lifestyle they present is one of affluence that is presumed by the audience to be characterised by freedom from financial constraints. Their appearance displays prosperity as a glorifying magnificence through visual signifiers of wealth such as transformative glittering surfaces or rich furs. This potentially inspires within the audience a desire to inhabit the position they occupy. The fantasy is then produced that the signifiers of wealth can provide access to becoming glamorous and with affluence one can leave behind daily concerns. The tantalising truth is that audiences never can become glamour. Glamour is alluring because it plays with distance: at once collapsing and reinstating the gap between glamour and audience. This can be seen through the example of the film star's red lipstick: applying red lipstick provides the promise of transformation but it only partly transforms the individual for a moment as they imagine and identify with being Other. It is only the distant and inaccessible star who truly embodies glamour precisely because they are ultimately inaccessible enough to disguise the reality of what it takes to cast glamour's spell.

Historicising Glamour: the Modern Girl & the Popular Film Star

Looking back on the 1920s, the stereotype of the modern girl stands as a glamorous icon of the period. This results both from the fashion on display and from an expression of femininity that challenged older conservative femininity and therefore established gender binaries. This newer, bolder, femininity was adventurous and the women who displayed it are represented as carefree. Susan Kingsley Kent provides a useful and evocative description of the flapper and her counterpart, the effeminate male:

Something like the blurring of gender lines that took place during the war continued afterwards, as young women of virtually every class – called, derisively,

“flappers”—dressed in boyish fashions, cut their hair short, smoked cigarettes, drove cars, and generally pursued an active, adventurous lifestyle. Their counterparts, the “bright young things”, men who had been too young to go to war in the years 1914-1918, offered themselves as effeminate contrasts, till it appeared, in the popular press at least, that young men and women had simply switched roles, characteristics, and styles with one another. Boyish women and effeminate men dominated the fashion pages of newspapers and magazines, representing the carefree, youth-oriented, pleasure-seeking, even hedonistic nature of the postwar generation sick and tired of a devastating war to which they had been unable to make a contribution; for others they constituted proof that society was in a complete state of disorder—disorder represented in gendered and sexualized terms (2009: 39–40).

The modern girl then presents the bold and adventurous personality of glamour: her focus on pursuing freedoms and pleasure whilst defying convention.

Kent also highlights within the text quoted the sexualised nature of the modern girl. The stereotypical flapper dress displayed more flesh than had been ordinarily seen in the Edwardian era by exposing lower legs and arms. To be a modern girl was a decision to reject convention of older generations and it also reflected the shift in gender roles that positioned modern girls as both desiring rather than just desired. In investigating the findings of the Modern Girl Around the World Research Project, Barlow *et al*/ highlight a fruitful area for future study raised by their own project comparing representations of the modern girl across the globe: ‘Focus on Modern Girls as sexual agents selecting their own sexual partners (male and female) and their desire to delay or avoid marriage will enable future examination of how Modern Girls established, transgressed or reworked modern regimes of heteronormativity’ (2005: 288). The modern girl is interesting as a stereotype of femininity because she is beginning to have a sexual agency that is transgressive in moving beyond heteronormative sexual frameworks.

It is Kent’s description of short hair and boyishness in combination with the assertion that the modern girl was transgressing established gender characteristics, that is particularly revealing. The boyish appearance of the modern girl has frequently been aligned to androgyny but actually serves to highlight the femininity of this stereotype. For instance, when viewing Marlene Dietrich in *Morocco* (Sternberg, 1930) dressed in a tuxedo, there is never any question that she inhabits a female body. In fact the point of her appearing dressed in this masculine suit is to evoke desire in the audience watching her cabaret act – a strategy that clearly worked as *Morocco* is considered to be the film that made Dietrich a star (Gundle, 2008: 190). The fitted cut of Dietrich’s tuxedo serves to

highlight her figure, pinching in at her waist and skimming over her hips. Dressed with or without the frock coat, her prime signifiers of femininity, her breasts, are emphasised either by the pocket-handkerchief that sits over one, or the waistcoat that cuts across the nipples and under the breasts. The top hat performs a similar trick, sitting on her head it emphasises that the unruly wavy bobbed haircut beneath it is not the traditional masculine hair you would expect to see under such an item of clothing. Dietrich as the cross-dressed cabaret artist Amy Jolly creates glamour because, as in her other roles, she ‘re-describe[s] the feminine without recourse to an ambiguous androgyny’ (Jacobowitz and Lippe, 1992: 4). The viewing experience is one where the juxtaposition of femininity with masculinity emphasises the female sexed body underneath – femininity is pushed into sharp relief by this redescription of what it is to be female. What emerges is not a heteronormative sexuality but one that is imbued with something more sensational because it pushes at the borders of acceptable feminine behaviour – one might almost say this glamorous sexuality acquires a transgressive danger by stepping outside older representations of heterosexual femininity, particularly as *Morocco*’s plot revolves around Amy Jolly’s choice of mate.

The silent film star, whose stardom preceded talkie stars such as Dietrich in the 1920s, also provides an interesting presentation of femininity precisely because of her excessive representation of femininity. (Although it should be noted that some of that glamour experienced now may also come from the nostalgia inspired by a time when film was finding its language of expression.) In describing Hollywood films of the 1920s, Mark Cousins describes them as having ‘an emotional amplitude greater than that of everyday life. ... Theirs is a phenomenally successful brand of emotional excess’ (2012: 67). This emotional amplitude or excess was represented not only in subject matter but also in an acting style that was melodramatic. Prior to the advent of sound cinema, female film stars relied predominantly on gesture in their performances and presented an excessive femininity – a hyper-femininity – to audiences. Glamour is closely linked to affluent excess and I consider this pre-sound representation of hyper-femininity as distinctly glamorous when read in the context of other performance forms.

By considering glamour in the 1920s and early 1930s through the affluent figure of the film star who is conventionally considered to be a glamorous figure, the framing of femininity can be understood to be a key part of the female bearer of glamour’s allure.

Glamour relies on sexual desirability and confers power. It is about images that proclaim their femininity through a hyper-feminine presentation of female excess. But, the sexual allure tinged with danger so necessary to glamour also relies on the juxtaposition of conventionally masculine and feminine attributes in the interwar period. This is not to say they aim at androgyny, instead they highlight and sexualise femininity – redescribing or reframing what it is to be feminine and imbuing it with power and inspiring desire. What is striking in the above discussion is that aerial performance, like glamour of the 1920s and early 1930s, relies on attributes traditionally ascribed as feminine (grace) and masculine (strength). The various ways in which soloists' femininity was performed is the subject of Chapter 4, but it should be noted that this mixing of gender attributes in the feminine frames aerial action as glamorous by the standards of the 1920s and early 1930s.

Glamour & Aerial Performance – the fiction of graceful weightlessness

The description of the modern girl and the film star historicises glamour in the 1920s and early 1930s and provides a window onto issues of gender within glamour. However, what I am most interested in exploring in this chapter is how aerial practice is intrinsically glamorous in its transformative nature – in imaginatively providing access to the fleeting impression of freedom. I am interested in the transformative fantasy of glamour and how this relates to distance and weightlessness in aerial performance. The transformative promise of glamour is 'a desire for something out of the ordinary' – it is a 'dream of escape' (Dyhouse, 2011: 4). Both aerial performance and glamour provide an experience that promises freedom but hides and denies reality from the audience. This can be seen as an oscillating relationship to distance: a constant tantalising collapsing and reinstating of the distance between audience and subject that relies on a fantasy of transformation into a free body. This kinaesthetic fantasy relies on the way in which aerial action inspires a fiction of weightlessness – it hides and muddies the relationship between the real and the illusory. In the following discussion I examine how the fiction of weightlessness is constructed by drawing together Susan Foster and Peta Tait's theories of movement, the role of grace in aerial action and aerialists' convention of performing difficulty as ease.

One of the oldest dreams of escape is the desire to fly and experience the associated freedoms of flight. The desire to experience unmechanised flight stretches back at least as far as the ancient Greeks and can be seen in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the story of Icarus and Daedalus (2000). Interestingly, it is one where the transformation into a flying body carries with it associations with the risk of death for those who did not obey the

rules by flying too close to the sun, much in the same way that the risk of death underwrites aerial performance and is identified as a trope of glamour by Postrel (2013: 57 & 193–199). This dream of escape as articulated in the desire to fly is one that is evoked when we watch aerial performance. It is most visible when witnessing acts where the body of the aerialist moves backwards and forwards across a space demonstrating dynamic movement. Examples of this include flying trapeze – the act most people think of when considering trapeze or aerial performance – where the flyer leaves a trapeze and flies free to the arms of a catcher hanging from a second trapeze; or swinging trapeze where an aerialist uses the backward and forward movements to perform tricks by jumping free at the beginning and end of the swing.

The movement of the bodies above has a physical response within the bodies of those watching aerial performance. When watching swinging or flying trapeze, I have found myself suddenly becoming aware that I am rocking backwards and forwards on the balls of my feet. This physical experience is one that Peta Tait has described as where ‘bodies communicate visually and physically... [and where] a spectator viscerally perceives the physicality of another body (or bodies) in a process of oscillating identification and disidentification’ (2005: 141). My awareness has then shifted outwards from my own body to those of other audience members as I have become aware that they too are moving in response to the movement of the aerial body above. In that watching moment, it is not only our bodies that are acting sympathetically, but our minds also. We know we are not experiencing flight as we stand rooted to the spot below, but our minds fantasise what it would be like to experience weightlessness in the space above. The experience of glamour shares this oscillation and this distance with the reception of aerial performance: both involve one imagining oneself in the subject’s position whilst acknowledging oneself as separate.

Although the outward response of audience members appears communal, Tait’s aerial catching reception theory situates the experience of watching aerialists to be one that is rooted in our lived experience and physical histories – in how we understand our own specific bodies and the experiences they have been through. Tait uses the example of Antony Hippisley Coxe, who compares the bodily sensation experienced watching thrill acts to those experienced when returning to school or during air raids in the Second World War (Tait, 2005: 142; Hippisley Coxe, 1951: 106–7). It could be argued that as

Coxe distinguishes thrill acts from aerial acts due to the skill involved in aerial performance and the variety it provides, that Tait's use of Coxe's recollections is misleading. However he does suggest a link between the experiences when he uses the 'very good trapeze artiste' to highlight the weaknesses he sees in the daredevil/thrill act (1951: 108). Coxe's experiences are used by Tait to argue that 'the performing body is received with bodily sensations linked to prior experiences combining physiological and psychological activity' (2005: 142). Here Tait is situating the experience of watching aerial performance within the specific and individual body and mind. The body's somatic response to an aerial body draws on both psychological and physical experiences in a powerful process of fantasising.

This experience of fantasising oneself performing the same actions as a moving body is not unique to aerial performance. Susan Leigh Foster draws dance theory and neurophysiology together to explore how movement elicits an emotional and physiological response within the person experiencing it in light of their particular historical moment (2011: 107–125). She describes how the firing of mirror neurons occurs when someone undertakes an activity but also when they experience someone else performing it. The experience of witnessing the movement acts as a rehearsal in the kinaesthetic system whose active engagement with its environment includes, alongside visual stimuli: muscle, joint and cutaneous receptors, and the vestibular system through which we understand gravity and that is also responsible for balance and spatial orientation. The kinaesthetic system is always learning and therefore viewing movement has the ability to change each individual's perception of the world (Foster, 2011: 122–3). What is particularly powerful about this experience is that it learns about movement through the individual's understanding of their own body.

Foster's core argument in *Choreographing Empathy* is centred on how our understanding of how we receive movement is culturally and historically situated. Her argument is that the wider understanding of body and movement in fields such as choreography, medicine and physical culture reveals how we experience movement, but that dance itself contributes to knowledge of the body. Bearing in mind the historical specificity of physicality, it is interesting that John Martin drew a strong connection between the moving body and the bodies experiencing their movement in the 1930s. Proving Foster's point about the

relevance of wider fields, Martin drew on the emerging field of neurophysiology and work on perception within landscapes to state:

Since we respond muscularly to the strains in architectural masses and the attitudes of rocks, it is plain to be seen that we will respond even more rigorously to the action of a body exactly like our own. We shall cease to be mere spectators and become participants in movement that is presented to us, and though to all outward appearances we shall be sitting quietly in our chairs, we shall nevertheless be dancing synthetically with all our musculature. Naturally these motor responses are registered by our movement sense receptors, and awaken appropriate emotional associations akin to those which have animated the dancer in the first place. It is the dancer's whole function to lead us into imitating his actions with our faculty for inner mimicry in order that we may experience his feelings (in Foster, 2011: 156–7).

Martin was arguing that those watching dance were not only experiencing the movements but also feeling the emotions embodied by it. Ultimately, as Foster highlights, Martin's universalist approach to the experience of movement may be suspect and the result of his particular historical moment (2011: 162). But, the fact he felt movement echoed so strongly within his body supports the statement that the apparent weightlessness of aerialists was felt in a variety of ways within the bodies of many 1920s and early 1930s audiences. This experiential response to movement may have been attached in a variety of individual ways to an emotive concept at the heart of glamour: that of freedom.

I do not equate the experience of viewing aerial performance to a specific event such as Coxe's. As an amateur static trapeze practitioner, I view aerial performance as an aerialist – something professional aerialist and academic Katrina Carter also highlights²⁹ (2014: 101). It is my 'Prior kinaesthetic experience of motion [that] also makes an image of motion meaningful... Each spectator brings his or her accumulated personal and social histories of body movement and motion to live... action, and these become absorbed into further live experiences of motion' (Tait, 2005: 144). My body and my mind relate themselves to the moving body above, using my knowledge as an aerialist to imagine my body making the motions demonstrated. During a production of No Fit State's *Bianco* I viewed a solo strap performance by a male aerialist and found myself constantly anticipating and imagining what his next position might be. Rather than imagining his body moving, I imagined my own body moving from position to position. However, I

²⁹ Carter highlights the need for empirical research into aerial reception rather than theorisation (2014: 102), although there would be dangers in assuming these to be historically universal.

did not imagine the considerable muscular exertion required but instead imagined his movements as weightless. At the time one of the moves he performed repeatedly, ‘meat hook’, was one I was struggling to perform myself. Yet I imagined my body as weightless in his place, knowing full well the muscular strength, control and skill it takes to perform that move that I transformed into something weightless. In the same moment I imagined my body as weightless, I was also aware that my feet were rooted to the ground. The experience oscillated between the identification and disidentification described by Tait – the oscillation acting as a collapsing and reinstating of distance between my body and the performer’s.

In watching the male performer I imaginatively transformed my body into his using my own aerial kinaesthetic understanding whilst I remained aware of my difference to him – I engaged in a kinaesthetic fantasy that used my own understanding of my body in creating the illusion of weightless movement. Yet, I also engaged in the fantasy despite the fact I know the muscular reality. Whatever the kinaesthetic understanding of bodies might be, in most cases the individual engages in the fantasy that they are weightless and that the movements are effortless. This is part of the power in experiencing aerial performance. The shared fiction of imagined weightlessness is not abstract; instead it utilises the acquired physical understanding the audience have of their own individual bodies and experience within the imaginative experience. This makes the experience richer and the fantasy more vivid because it engages the body and its lived experiences. It collapses the distance between aerialist and performer, regardless of gender, through the individually experienced somatic fiction of weightlessness whilst the audience member remains unavoidably aware of the fact their feet are rooted to the ground.

This fiction of weightlessness is closely related to glamour’s fantasy of freedom. Ultimately both glamour and reception of aerial performance promise an inaccessible escape – one that through the experience provides an individual with the tantalising taste of what it might be like to be glamorously free of everyday constraints or to fly. Both also require the subject to be or do something we are not willing to do or be ourselves: to be glamorous one needs to be dangerously daring, courting the cusp of respectability; to be an aerialist, one needs to be dangerously daring by placing one’s body at risk of death from falling. (See Chapter 4 for an analysis of real and performed risk in the acts of Leitzel and Leers). Both involve people taking the risks we are not prepared to take

ourselves and suggest the transformative imaginative experience of glamour is also felt through our individual lived experience.

The strength and muscular control required to create the fiction of weightlessness are written into the bodies of the aerialists who perform them – it hides the real effort required. I have personally experienced how the practice of aerial performance has reconfigured my musculature through the repetitive movements performed in training: the most immediately visible changes being my more developed latissimus dorsi (lat) muscles and biceps. Beginning to narrow my focus onto the celebrity aerialist who forms the focus for this chapter, Lillian Leitzel is described as having an over-developed upper body that resembled a ‘middle-weight boxer’ or ‘professional wrestler’ (Verney, 1978: 202; Butler in Taylor, 1956: 219), yet she is always described as feminine. Not only does this describe her body as muscular, it also indicates that this muscularity was associated with masculinity as the role of boxer and wrestler were male professions in the 1920s. The positions demonstrated and framed as weightless actually require a strong body that has been rigorously conditioned to undertake them. However, aerial performance is not just a demonstration of strength, the training regime also displays and requires grace.

The fantasy of the aerialist’s weightlessness is one that we are able to indulge in partly because of the grace that is required to perform many aerial movements. By grace I describe the elements in aerial performance that are normally associated with good technique and traditional stereotypes of femininity that pre-dated the modern girl. This is the fluidity or smoothness of movement that is often accompanied by limbs that are extended and stretched out under tension – this includes hands stretching upwards from lengthened arms and toes pointed sharply from tense legs. These positions and the quality of movement they display hold comparisons with ballet, a dance discipline commonly associated with grace. In ballet these positions and the quality of movement they demonstrate are aligned with femininity in being described as elegant, refined and as demonstrating poise – as in aerial performance, they also associate the moving body with lightness. In aerial performance, grace is required to perform most aerial movements. The signifiers of grace, such as pointed toes, help to engage the muscles of the legs, enabling them more easily to be pushed into the desired position. Muscular tension permits aerial equipment to slip more easily over taut flesh. For instance, new static trapeze students learning to move from hanging from their knees (or hocks) to sitting on

the bar, often find pointing their toes helps them create the leg tension that allows the steel bar to slip more easily across the leg muscle. Aerial performance requires grace in order for movements to be executed more easily for the aerialist and in doing so lightness becomes equated with weightlessness for the audience member. 'Grace is what makes glamour so dangerous and alluring. By hiding anything that might break the spell, it renders our desires clear and accessible' (Postrel, 2013: 80). The graceful movements in aerial performance are what hide the reality of the strength it takes to maintain the glamorous illusion of weightlessness.

Aerial performance creates the impression of grace through more than just bodily tension, pointed toes or its references to ballet, but also through the smoothness and apparent weightlessness of movements. There is a naturalness or effortlessness in grace that is particularly relevant to this discussion because aerial movement gives the impression of weightlessness. One element of aerial action that creates this impression is the swing. This is used to facilitate motion in the simplest and most common movements. It can be seen in the simple action of reaching for the ropes when hanging by your hocks (or knees) on a static trapeze. This is completed most easily by throwing your bodyweight away from the ropes, allowing gravity to work with momentum on your return, propelling your body back towards the ropes with increased energy. Using gravity and momentum together allows you to reach higher in the ropes with less effort. It also creates a slight pause as you reach the apex of the movement upwards that is most visible on flying or swinging trapeze, where the acceleration upwards is equalised by gravity – an exhilarating moment that is described by some aerialists as the 'dead point', and that feels at its most extreme like a pause where time stops still for a moment. In doing so, you give your audience the impression that your body is weightless despite the fact you are still using muscles and are still performing bodily and mental work.

This apparent weightlessness allows those receiving aerial action to fantasise that the aerial body is weightless and therefore free – a process that is facilitated through grace, but also through the convention that performers do not express pain or discomfort, something Stoddart describes as the 'illusion of ease' (2000: 175). Perhaps because Carter is also a practitioner, she instead uses the phrase 'portrayal of pain-free control' to describe a convention of aerial performance that she considers an aerial aesthetic (2014: 79). Aerial performance puts pressure on the body: steel equipment inflicts bruises and

ropes can leave weeping burns. In the process of acquiring skills, your relationship to pain changes but, in doing so, it can also lead to what I term the ‘blank faced aerialist’. The focus for the performer is on appearing graceful rather than expressing pain or discomfort. The side-effect is a loss of expression as the performer focuses on performing effortless not-pain or not-discomfort – at its most extreme it can even be witnessed by audience members as a slightly disconcerting fixed smile. There are indications of this fixed smile within newspaper reports from the late nineteenth century of the first aerial celebrity and first man to perform the solo flying trapeze, Jules Léotard. These reports describe Léotard’s ‘grim smile’ and suggest this performance style stretches back to the very first aerialists (‘Public Amusements’, 1861).

This performance of aerial action as pain-free can be used to link and extend Tait’s and Foster’s work by embedding the fiction of weightlessness within the somatic experience of watching aerial performance. If the individual experiencing aerialists from below rehearses the aerial action within their own kinaesthetic system as effortless, then the body will learn to associate such action with weightlessness and movements free of effort. What is so profound about this system of learning is that it is embodied learning felt with every bodily sense – every visceral fibre of our being. The kinaesthetic system is also responsible for the paradox within this experience: the very same system is responsible for balance and spatial experience, and therefore is always aware that the body is located on the ground. The receiver is aware when it cannot perform those same aerial movements it has learnt to associate with weightlessness through experiencing an aerialist’s movement. This kinaesthetic system and the way in which it acts on perception results in a fantasy perpetuated by aerialists’ performance of ease, where we do not imagine the considerable strength required but instead engage in a kinaesthetic fantasy that reconfigures the aerial body above as weightless – as free.

This weightless kinaesthetic fantasy relies on a combination of the traditionally gendered attributes of feminine grace and masculine strength. Peta Tait has described this combination as a ‘double gendering’ of the aerial body (2005: 31). In Chapter 4 I build upon the concept of variously gendered aerial bodies to describe female aerialists as negotiating gender due to changing attitudes to femininity. However here, in the context of 1920s glamour, the juxtaposition of traditionally masculine strength within the feminine image of the female aerialist functions in a similar way to Dietrich’s costume in

Morocco or the modern girl's boyish appearance. In demonstrating 'masculine' muscular strength the female aerialist becomes sexualised, pushing her femininity and the femininity of her graceful action into sharp relief – allowing her to glamorously reframe what it is to be feminine. Like the modern girl, the female aerialist's femininity becomes exciting in functioning outside the traditional heteronormative dichotomy. Her representation of femininity displays a strong female body as having agency through its bodily control. However, in order to retain its glamour the juxtaposition of traditionally gendered attributes has to be precariously balanced in order to not appear too masculine – it dangerously functions on the cusp of respectable femininity.

Lillian Leitzel & Glamorous Interwar Circus

Glamour is at home in the circus of the 1920s partly because of the nostalgic world created under the big top but also through its place in commodity culture and its visible ability to expend money. Established wisdom may align circus more closely with the grotesque, but the biggest circuses were described as glamorous on both sides of the Atlantic: 'The word "circus" recalls for many of us scenes of glamour and wonderment that are dim memories' that the writer considers Bertram Mills Circus to have nostalgically reinvigorated, whereas in America the Ringling-Barnum circus 'has its own glamour of romance' ('International Circus at Olympia', 1921; 'Positively Not a Sex Play', 1922). The circus transformed places temporarily through circus practices into glamorous spaces across America and in permanent circus buildings in both America and Britain. The circus created an Other world that was glamorous in its difference to the everyday lives of its audiences – particularly for more rural audiences who were temporarily exposed to the wider world (Postrel, 2013: 165). What separated these circuses from the small tenting circuses that might possibly have been considered to align with the grotesque, was its demonstration of affluence. Bertram Mills Circus provided comfort and a luxurious setting for audience members, whilst the ability for the Ringling-Barnum circus to travel the USA on the railroad with such a large cast and crew demonstrated its affluence. Not only that, it presented its performers in costumes that gained coverage and press reports precisely for their glamour:

Soft silks and satins, filmy, billowy and bouffant tulles, graceful, swaying ostrich plumes and swishy feather skirts. Ropes of pearls and scintillating crystals, glistening amber jewels and flashing jet. Enormous and gorgeous headdresses of pearls and diamonds, of silver and gold cloths and jewels, or softly waving plumes... simply dazzling (Bennett, 1930).

The most successful circuses were glamorous in transforming places into glamorous spaces through both circus practice and their demonstrations of power through affluence.

The circus aesthetic is one that speaks of glamour, where aerialists performed in a colourful and vibrant performance environment alongside the furs of living and breathing animals such as lions and tigers – their aerial practice providing another transformative experience. And in this nostalgic circus world performers made a wondrous spectacle of their bodies. Leitzel in particular performed in sequined dresses that glittered under circus lights wearing make-up that made her face appear flawless and more beautiful from a distance – her body costumed in glamour's ostentatiously affluent consumables and presented alongside acts that drew on the ideas of exoticism and danger embedded in the concept of glamour. In Leitzel's case, the reason why she was the most glamorous circus celebrity of the 1920s was because of her presentation in the largest most affluent circuses, the way her act played with distance through its composition, and her assertive hyper-feminine performance style.

Lillian Leitzel: a Glamorously Composed Act

I am not the first to align Lillian Leitzel with glamour; she herself highlighted the 'glamour of my act' (Bradshaw, 1931: 16), indicating that she understood her aerial action as key in the construction of her glamour. In popular circus literature, others such as Esse Forrester O'Brien described her life as containing 'glamor' (1959: 121). However, it is Robert Lewis Taylor whose chapter devoted to Leitzel most evokes glamour both explicitly and implicitly through the language that he uses (1956: 215–250). He states 'When she fell to her death... an era closed, the circus lost its glamour and a stature it may never regain' and that she had 'an acute awareness of the meaning and excitements of glamour.' Throughout the chapter he uses the same terms associated with glamour about Leitzel, describing 'her magic', how the audience were 'charmed' and the 'hypnotic' 'spell she cast' over audiences (1956: 217, 221 & 215). His descriptions of her life and her act are vivid and over-blown, written in the language of glamorous excess and focused on extremes. Most revealingly he frames her performance as one that aligns weightlessness with enchantment and the freedom of the space above from mundanity: 'The good fairies, while giving her the freedom of the upper air, at once lifted from her the tedium' (1956: 217). The transformative power of glamour with its ability to

weightlessly lift one outside of the everyday are conflated by Taylor with the experience of watching Lillian Leitzel perform her aerial acts.

According to popular circus writers Leitzel may have been a glamorous star, but an analysis of her act's construction provides some explanation as to how her act cast its glamour so strongly. The act itself played with distance, at times making the audience feel closer and more separate from Leitzel's body, inspiring the fantasy of freedom through weightlessness, whilst including dangerously violent acts and sexual connotations. Leitzel's act is broadly described as having two parts: the first performed on roman rings which was frequently described as graceful, and the second on planche rope. Planche rope takes its name from the movement it facilitates and has a loop at the bottom in which the wrist is slipped. This enables the body to complete a planche turn where it performs a revolution around the wrist. Although it is true that Leitzel's act demonstrated expertise on two different pieces of equipment, ascents and descents also figure as key moments. In presenting her performances of skill, Leitzel is praised for her circus showmanship (Taylor, 1956: 225; Pond, 1948a: 124). It is primarily this combination of the oscillating distance implicit in demonstrations of aerial skill that Leitzel activated through expert showmanship that made Leitzel's act glamorous.

Leitzel's first ascent to her roman rings was an extraordinary feat of strength that was glamorous in its ability to inspire wonder. It must have made her appear superhuman as she swung her body up into a back planche with her body arched over a supporting arm that twisted up her back. She would then reach up with the free arm and swing her body over again (stleonm, 2010), in a climb that propelled her three feet up the rope and was generally regarded as the repertoire of men (Croft-Cooke and Meadmore, 1946: 65; Bradna and Spence, 1953: 149). The feat was made all the more extraordinary by Leitzel's diminutive stature. At less than four foot ten inches in height she must have appeared tiny, despite the high-heeled mules she wore on entry and exit of the ring (Bradna and Spence, 1953: 148; Kline, 2008: 60–61; Taylor, 1956: 215). She chose to highlight her smallness and therefore the extraordinary nature of her body from the moment she entered the arena alongside a tall man who acted as her subordinate footman (Taylor, 1956: 215). Fred Bradna, equestrian director at the Ringling-Barnum circus remarks precisely on this effect when he states that: 'Her daintiness was accentuated at her entry by the towering figure of her footman, Willie Mosher, a six-foot-four-inch giant in the

uniform of a hotel doorman ...On muddy days he carried Leitzel into the arena.’ Particularly in the vast Ringling-Barnum tent, Leitzel’s body would have appeared tiny and distant even without the use of Willie Mosher’s large frame but, with it, the extraordinary nature of her act was emphasised. This positioning of her body as superhuman or extraordinary separates the aerial star from film stars such as Clara Bow who were positioned as similar to audience members, as ‘the girl next door’. Leitzel’s extraordinary body is what creates wonder and awe at the skills and strength on display, and is the reason she was glorified. Experiencing aerial performance engages audience members in a process of identification and disidentification on the basis of their own lived experience and, as such, the framing of a body as extraordinary emphasises distance.

Using the word dainty to describe Leitzel may be considered as contradicting her glamour, but instead points to how female aerialists performed a careful balancing act when performing their femininity. Carol Dyhouse has highlighted that the word ‘dainty’ is not normally associated with glamour but with an older manifestation of femininity (2011: 88). However, Leitzel’s alignment of her body with an older femininity may also have been used to resist claims of masculinity in her act. Leitzel’s planche climb was the repertoire of men and in framing it as dainty she prevented her act from demonstrating too much muscular masculinity. Glamour relies on pushing the boundary of what is respectable but not over-stepping it; by framing her act as dainty, Leitzel was able to appear on the glamorous cusp of graceful feminine respectability.



Figure 10: Atwell (1931) Lillian Leitzel performing on Roman Rings, glass plate negative, CWi 873, Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin

Leitzel's first rope climb was a showy ascent used to place her on her roman rings, where she performed an act that is described as full of 'grace' and 'skilful' (Tait, 2005: 141; Pond, 1948a: 124). In this first section she moved her body between rings (see Figure 10), swinging her elegantly pointed legs above her head and rolling her body so that it curved backwards over one arm into a planche position. She would also hang from a single ring, using her movement to turn the swivel rigged into her equipment, creating momentum that spun her body beneath. As she spun, she struck an elegant pose with one leg pointed to the floor and the other leg pointed at the knee in a position similar to the *retiré* used when pirouetting in ballet (stleonm, 2010). Swinging her legs above her head she also performed hand stands in the rings with elegantly pointed toes (Pond, 1948a: 124). She then dropped her body back using her weight to create the momentum with which to revolve her body around her shoulders in what is commonly known by aerialists as a dislocation (Kline, 2008: 209). These actions contain both the dynamism of swings and rolls and muscular control, accompanied by the graceful markers of pointed toes and extended legs. Throughout 'She "threw it away" ...made it look easy' (Bradna and Spence, 1953: 149). This combination of dynamic and graceful movement presented as easy framed her performance as weightless – a fact noted in one newspaper report which asked 'How did Lillian Leitzel "break every law of gravity" last night' ('Bigger and Better!', 1925). Her apparently weightless aerial action created the glamorous kinaesthetic fantasy of freedom.



Figure 11: Photograph of Lillian Leitzel performing a planche turn, CWi 2578, Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin

However, the cleverest collapsing and reinstatement of distance occurs in the second half of her act where the movement became more extreme. It is the planche rope turns (another dislocation move) that are said to be what made her famous and it is these that were used to promote her act ('advertisement', 1922a; 'advertisement', 1922b; 'Makes 'Em Gasp', 1922). When performing at the American Ringling-Barnum circus, Leitzel was afforded the unusual honour of having action stopped in all of the other circus rings and stages, so that the focus was solely on her centre ring performance. With her hand hooked into the planche rope, she threw her legs upwards and head down in order to project her body over her shoulder in a series of revolutions. (Figure 11 gives some indication of the movement, demonstrating how her body revolved around her wrist.) Her act was made more wondrous and spectacular to the audience as they counted each circling of her body and as a bass drum accentuated each full revolution (Culhane in Tait, 2005: 85; Bradna and Spence, 1953: 150; O'Brien, 1959: 125). In performance she generally completed somewhere between 60 and 100 revolutions. Her all-time record is recorded variously as 249 or 243 revolutions as part of a publicity stunt (Bradna and Spence, 1953: 150; Culhane in Tait, 2006: 85).

Although the remarkable nature of the planche turn distanced the audience from her body, the very act of counting collapsed the distance between her body and her audience. Once the audience began counting each revolution of her body around her wrist in time to the drum's beat, they were implicated in her continuous movement. The question many audience members asked themselves was 'how long can she keep it up?' (Pond, 1948a: 124), but the unvoiced question may have been: if I stop counting will she stop? The sound that emanated from each audience member's body put them in a two-way relationship with Leitzel: the counting made them complicit in Leitzel's continued movement, whilst the volume of the counting demonstrated to Leitzel the enthusiasm of her audience. Even in the vast Ringling-Barnum tent, the act of audience counting bridged the gap between their own bodies and the glorious body above – increasing the audience's engagement with Leitzel's extraordinary act.

The planche turn itself is a remarkable feat that when performed by Leitzel combined violence with sexual connotations. Today it tends to appear as a short section performed on other equipment such as straps rather than the extended feature Leitzel performed (Kavanagh, 2016). At the time and shortly after it is noted as being 'a test of stamina' or 'endurance' and is frequently described as 'violent' rather than graceful. This violence is what contributed to some of the act's titillating and sensational glamour. There is something dangerous and transgressive about glamour. The 'presence of a low Other [in glamour] is essential as it is vital to the maintenance of the dialectic between class and sleaze' (Gundle and Castelli, 2006: 58). This thin line between class or sleaze surrounds the issue of how wealth can be tastefully used to demonstrate power and glorify the individual. This relationship between class and sleaze in the demonstration of affluence is comparable to the application of red lipstick. Although the application of make-up was more socially acceptable in the 1920s, the use of bolder colours still risked censure in Britain (Dyhouse, 2011: 84). How could Leitzel's body survive and sustain her continual violent revolutions, even as her hair worked free of its pins? (Taylor, 1956: 220; Bradna and Spence, 1953: 140). Bradna in particular suggests that the unloosing of her hair from its pins was a deliberate act. If it was designed for effect, then this would have emphasised the violence of the planche turns she performed. The violent repetitive revolutions created distance between her body and the bodies of her audience.

However, as much as Leitzel's act may have been violent, it still tapped into the kinaesthetic fantasy of weightlessness which connected audience members somatically to her body. Descriptions point to this in stating that Leitzel would 'whirl' or 'whirls' around her rope ('Palladium', 1929; Taylor, 1956: 220), whirling, weightless in that space high above the audience. This weightless sensation is something individuals would have desired as they watched Leitzel's frenetic body but female audience members would probably not have desired her transgressively muscular body. In the 1920s most women would not want her developed upper body, in a similar way that they would be careful about exactly how much make-up they chose to apply to their faces.

Leitzel's cascading hair may have highlighted the danger or violence in her act, but it also contained glamour due to its sexual connotations. Hair has often been conflated with female sexuality and Leitzel's flowing locks sexualised her female body. Not only did this highlight her sex as female, it also had significance when her feet hit the ground. Leitzel was performing an act that relied on her athletic ability and stamina. This act caused her heart rate and body temperature to rise and her breathing to become more pronounced. On alighting from the rope she had loose hair, was breathing hard and would have appeared flushed to those watching from the seats closest to the centre ring. In one light this effect of movement on her body may be considered to disrupt glamour's carefully controlled surface, but the sexual connotations are more significant in the construction of Leitzel's glamour. The significance of courtesans, originally considered responsible for gendering glamour as female, place sex and sexual desirability central in glamour. Returning to the 1920s, the sexual connotations of Leitzel's body on alighting after her finale demonstrate her appearing, like the modern girl, in control of her own sexual body. It seems unlikely that adult audience members with a clear sight of Leitzel could have missed the sexual undertones and possible comparisons to a post-coital female body.

Lillian Leitzel: Performance of a Bold Personality

Leitzel's performer persona is a major factor in her glamour as it played with distance in the presentation of a bold personality and in her showmanship – at times it collapsed the distance and at others it reinstated it. Part of Leitzel's expert showmanship was the 'dynamic personality' that she presented and was so vital to her glamour (O'Brien, 1959: 221). She is said to have 'stood at ease and looked around, establishing the wonderfully electric connection between herself and her audience' on entering the ring (Taylor, 1956: 221). Pictures of Leitzel performing the final section of her act show her mouth open in

a wide smile (Figure 11) and one writer describes her laughter (Taylor, 1956: 218); while one contemporary newspaper report asks potential audience members to ‘hear her laugh in the face of danger’ (*‘Girl Dare-Devil’*, 1919). Even if this was only a metaphorical allusion, there was something joyful about her performance style. This presentation of enjoyment is notable because it is a very different performance style to the convention of the blank-faced aerialist who surfaces throughout aerial history. This performance of enjoyment in aerial movement was key to her performer persona and demonstrated the type of self-confidence that glamour requires – it was also significant in framing her body as weightless.

This self-confidence was demonstrated in her transgressing the normal circus rules by performing the role of diva. Circus programmes in the US were tightly choreographed, particularly because a few extra minutes could disrupt the dismantling of the circus tent – affecting when the circus would leave and when it would arrive in the next city. Leitzel is described as performing the role of diva by extending her eight-minute set. It also caused problems for the circus band who would be required to improvise during sections where she would ‘rock gently back and forth for several minutes, smiling, waving ... The audience was delighted and encouraged her to disrupt the show as long as she pleased’ (Taylor, 1956: 216). By performing the role of diva, Leitzel demonstrated the agency that her glamorous celebrity conferred. She simultaneously pleased her audience whilst also positioning her performance as having the power to choose to disrupt the entire circus itself – her celebrity demanded it and her audience enjoyed her glamorous and transgressive activity.

Her performance style was characterised by an excessive hyper-femininity similar to 1920s silent film stars. Alongside waving to her audience, she also blew kisses, swayed seductively and performed balletic poses (Steele, 2010; Verney, 1978: 202; O’Brien, 1959: 124–5; Taylor, 1956: 216). Her most extreme performance of this hyper-femininity was a performed faint at the end of her act (Taylor, 1956: 220; Bradna and Spence, 1953: 154). Fred Bradna considered this to occur when important celebrities were in the audience. His description also makes it clear that the faint was frowned upon by the Ringling management. This performed action was a crowd-pleaser aimed at showing how hard Leitzel worked for her audience and one that was called upon when Leitzel thought a particularly good show was required. On some nights Leitzel would haul herself up as

help was offered, assume a 'brave but stricken look' and refuse assistance in order to stand up unaided (Taylor, 1956: 220). In the large Ringling-Barnum tent, where small and delicate movements would be lost within the vast arena, this melodramatic performance style would have enabled audience members to enjoy her performance at a distance. It presented her femininity as glamorous in its excessive nature but also was another method of bridging the physical distance between aerialist and audience.

However, glamour relies on never letting the audience get too close – if you do, the illusion might be broken by reality being viewed. Glamour suggests nobility or aristocracy through an emphasis on affluence that is out of the reach of most people's experience. It is expressed through the aesthetics of glittering surfaces and its associations with a learned or higher class. Directly tied to Leitzel's diva image is her aristocratic position as Queen of the Circus, bedecked in glittering costumes. This is reinforced through the apparent employment of subordinates who accompanied Leitzel into the ring. Her footman was earlier mentioned for the way his height emphasised her smallness, but she was also accompanied into the Ringling-Barnum ring by a maid (Taylor, 1956: 215; Bradna and Spence, 1953: 149). The extent to which these were performed roles is questionable. In the case of Mabel Clemings (see Figure 12), circus histories recount stories that position her as maid onstage and offstage (Taylor, 1956: 215, 233 & 234–5). However, Mabel's friend Tiny Kline considers her to be 'not quite a maid, but to appear as such' (2008: 211–2). The role of maid and footman in performance was to stand and assist if required, perhaps her footman might carry Leitzel into the ring if it was muddy – preventing her costume from being marked by the everyday muddiness of the ground. Not only was she performing the role of diva, she was also demonstrating her affluence through the subordinates she publicly presented as employed at her beck and call both during the moment of live performance and outside it in press and publicity images such as Figure 12 below (depicting Leitzel and her maid). The choice to present her extraordinary body alongside a footman and maid aligns it with aristocracy and an affluence that would have been outside the experience of most audience members watching her act. They frame Leitzel's body as being distant from audience members in two separate but linked ways that glorify her body: the first, noted earlier, made her activity appear extraordinary in highlighting her body's smallness; whilst the second presented her as separately wealthy. Both the extraordinary and aristocratic body create separateness or distance that glamorises Leitzel's body.



Figure 12: Photograph of Leitzel and her maid, Mabel Clemings, CWi 2573, Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin

Although this leisured life where one's every whim was catered for would be outside the experience of most of those attending the circus, this added further glamour to her performance. Not only was Leitzel performing an act that inspired the kinaesthetic fantasy of weightlessness, it also suggested that if you could perform this act, you could also purchase the accoutrements of leisure. The paradox being that audience members knew this was outside their reach because it required being trained in a circus. The fiction perpetuated that if you could successfully fly and become weightless, then you too could have a footman and a maid. If you could successfully rise up above the everyday then you too could live a glamorously unconventional life of luxury and choice – you too could be truly free.

Conclusion: To Glamour

At the core of glamour is a transformative experience, and aerial performance primarily creates glamour because it inspires a gender blurred kinaesthetic fantasy of weightless freedom within the bodies of watching audience members. The mixing of traditionally gendered attributes of strength and grace in these apparently weightless movements sexualises the body, adding the vital sexual element of glamour. However, it is the transformative power of the fantasy of weightless free movement that is at the heart of

aerial glamour and is created by graceful movements, the swing and the convention of demonstrating pain-free movement. This kinaesthetic fantasy is one where the distance between the body below and above is constantly collapsed and reinstated, creating the push and pull required for the glamorous Other to remain distant yet tantalisingly within grasp. The distance of glamour that prevents the self from truly embodying it is also the distance that separates us from the aerial body performing above. The allure of aerial glamour is the promise of, and our desire in, experiencing our own bodies as physically weightless and metaphorically free from everyday concerns. What is so captivating is that we bring our own bodies, heavy with our own lived experience of movement to this imaginative learning experience - it is powerful because it is felt with every perceptual fibre of our bodies. It is this glamour that has inspired artists from other media to use the female aerialist as a central protagonist in seminal twentieth-century works that ask us to question the nature of reality, such as Angela Carter's *Night Circus* (1984) and Wim Wender's *Wings of Desire* (1987), well after female aerialists' celebrity status has faded.

What made Lillian Leitzel the epitome of aerial glamour in the 1920s was the way in which she performed weightlessness, managing the distance between her sexualised body and the bodies of her audience and by creating a bold hyper-feminine performance persona. What is particularly interesting is that the planche turn she gained her fame from was the moment where Leitzel's body demonstrated itself as most exhilaratingly weightless. In performance the movements such as her remarkable rope climb presented her body as extraordinarily and distantly different, whilst audience counting linked audience members to Leitzel through voices that appeared to drive her continual revolutions. The framing of her body as aristocratic also served to separate it from the lived experience of most audience members, whilst the bold, hyper-feminine performance style bridged the gap by allowing those positioned at the back of the tent to view her activity. In one moment the audience was imagining their body in Leitzel's place, whilst in the next they were considering how extraordinarily different and separate it was from their own.

Leitzel was at home in the circus of the 1920s because it was a glamorous place where the power of affluence was on display. The largest circuses in the period employed glittering spangles, living furs, and spectacular costumes to huge audiences. These surfaces provided aesthetics that are closely aligned to glamour and situate the female

aerialist in a space that complemented and contributed to her glamour. After all, female aerialists may have hovered dangerously above the circus ring, but their bodies were also part of the earthy, bold, and colourful circus world – their performance practices were amongst others that transformed places into circus spaces. It is perhaps the element of transformation present in aerial performance that has led the form to continue to be most commonly associated with the circus rather than vaudeville or variety.

This discussion about aerial glamour also allows some wider conclusions to be made about glamour itself. Although Leitzel epitomised aerial glamour, I have also demonstrated how aerial performance is intrinsically glamorous. As such, it should be noted that glamour is not restricted to the star and is different to celebrity because celebrity relies on embodying current concerns of culture that will be explored in Chapter 4. There is also a relationship between risk and danger in glamour: to be glamorous there must be a fantasy of freedom that cannot be achieved by the audience member. The manifestation of this freedom must also be one in which there is a risk that the audience member must not be willing to take. A glamorous star presents a personality that would risk censure as it pushes at the cusp of respectability, whilst the aerialist places their body at risk from falling and death. This relationship between risk and danger in aerial celebrity will be explored in more detail in the following chapter.

In the case of Leitzel, she ran the risk of being described as unfeminine in performing acts of strength and owning a muscular body that was normally the domain of men. She managed her persona to straddle this boundary of acceptable strength within her act. However, the transformative glorifying power of glamour is also responsible for her muscular body being considered both strong and feminine. Glamour in the 1920s was founded upon the presence of traditionally masculine elements within femininity as a means of sexualising the female body and, in doing so, redefined what it meant to be female. Glamour is central in understanding how female aerialists contributed to the redefinition of some ideals of femininity to include strength because it was a transformative experience that had the power to glorify unconventional female bodies as feminine.

3. Aerial Celebrity & Showmanship: the Performance of Skill & Risk

Glamour may be attributed to many but enduring celebrity is the domain of few. In the context of circus, showmanship is at the heart of celebrity. Showmanship suggests knowingness or astuteness and is an expert balancing of elements of performance so that they will appeal to an audience. In this chapter and the one that follows I explore the elements of showmanship that were most significant in the success of female aerialists of the 1920s and early 1930s. In the Introduction I describe circus as a vibrant and sensational popular entertainment that comprised of displays of skill that often placed bodies at risk. In this chapter I define the nature of aerial celebrity as different to other forms of celebrity because it was founded on how risk and skill were presented and performed to audiences – kinaesthetic fantasy hides effort but it is not the only aerial illusion. This is particularly pertinent in the 1920s and early 1930s because female solo stars such as Lillian Leitzel and Luisita Leers became popular by performing risky endurance feats on an international circuit. In defining the nature of aerial celebrity using the characteristics of risk and skill so central to circus, this chapter distinguishes aerial celebrities from popular performers. It also examines how both risk and skill are gendered and can be performed within expert showmanship as skilful vulnerability to achieve the pleasurable frisson of excitement so integral to aerial performance.

The need to define what aerial celebrity is leads me to first outline some of the existing scholarship on celebrity, and in doing so, to highlight how it differs from glamour. Chris Rojek's classification of celebrity is useful in highlighting the foundation of skill in some celebrity. But it is Joseph Roach's theory of 'It' and public intimacy that emerges as a particularly fruitful method for understanding risk and skill as central to the allure of aerial celebrity when reconfigured as skilful vulnerability. I explore the relationship between skill and risk by focusing on the endurance feats of two female soloists who performed acts that demanded virtuosic skill whilst emphasising risk. Both performers differentiated themselves from other performers by including such a quantifiable risky feat as a calling card within their act. The first, Luisita Leers, is not remembered as a celebrity today but was a centre ring Ringling-Barnum star who performed elbow rolls or muscle grinds as the finale to her act. My analysis of Leers works in two ways: it allows

me to demonstrate that risk and skill are not necessarily located where the audience assume; but more importantly, her performance appeared too safe, allowing her to be remembered for virtuosic skill but not as a celebrity. The second is Lillian Leitzel, who was the foremost circus celebrity of the 1920s and whose planche turns were used in publicity on both sides of the Atlantic ('advertisement' 1922; Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus, n.d.). The sophistication with which aerialists performed the relationship between risk and skill was a key component of showmanship that can be used to distinguish popular performers such as Leers from celebrities such as Leitzel. Integral to Lillian Leitzel's celebrity was the complex representation of risk and skill in performance and media coverage. Leitzel invited audience members to consider her skilled performance more risky than it truly was at the same time as the performance of risk highlighted her skill.

Celebrity

Glamour and celebrity bear striking similarities, but they are not the same thing. Glamour and celebrity include projection, desire and a paradoxical relationship to distance. But, the celebrity need not be glamorous and someone can be glamorous without being an enduring star. The problem for writers of glamour is that the subject for analysis who forms a common point of reference is the celebrity, whilst the scholar of celebrity is often drawn to images of glamour due to its allure.³⁰ Glamour is about the transformative moment unfolding before you or as it is captured in a static image; whereas celebrity radiates outwards from the various images or the live moments of performance, using the 'real' stories and back-stage photographs to create an enduring public persona for the star. Celebrity frequently uses the fascination inherent in glamour as part of its allure – they are linked, but they are separate.

Glamour and celebrity developed under similar circumstances when power structures founded on aristocracy and religion changed. Both are founded on an emerging capitalist system with more fluid social systems but, whereas glamour derived its power from the trappings of aristocracy, celebrity is regarded as emerging when organised religion began to decline (Gledhill, 1991: 208; Rojek, 2001: 13). The increasing commodification of

³⁰ Jane Goodall highlights this issue when describing the pragmatics involved in analysis of stage presence, another related concept. She describes how any performer can have stage presence but that celebrities provide points of reference with enough surviving documentation to 'reconstitute an imaginative picture of their impact' (2008: 16).

society led to the emergence of the mass multi-media systems required to manufacture and disseminate celebrity images (Rojek, 2001: 16; Dyer, 1987: 3 & 16). This emphasis on religion is significant because celebrities are considered to have an effect on our psyches that is similar to saints (Roach, 2005: 16; Roach, 2007: 16), and act as 'substitute heroes' (Boorstin, 2012: 74). The fact that these are not real heroes or saints, but instead manufactured by the media, has led celebrities to first be described as 'synthetic' by Boorstin and later Roach who added the term 'vicarious' to emphasise the inauthenticity of the experience (Boorstin, 2012: 47; Roach, 2005). For Boorstin, celebrities are little more than 'human pseudo-events' that satisfy the hunger for constant news required by the increasing number of news distribution channels (2012: 66).

This emphasis on the synthetic or 'accessory' surface of celebrity (Roach, 2007) could run the risk of diminishing the power they have on our psyches as substitute saints or heroes – these are public figures who inspire desire through contradictory relationships. The most significant of these is the relationship between the public and private self. Rojek considers the necessity of individuals to provide a public face within an increasingly public society to be a condition for celebrity (2001: 9). This societal situation allows the celebrity to imply or dramatise a relationship or opposition between the private self and public presentation of self (Gledhill, 1991: 227; Rojek, 2001: 11; Dyer, 1987: 10). It is this separation between the audience member's situation and the inaccessible star that is considered as desirable by Jackie Stacey, because this untouchability allows them to retain their status as the most enduring icons (1994: 234). It is the distance between the celebrity's private and public self that creates the propensity for celebrity desire. Like glamour's distance, (Chapter 2), part of the attraction of the celebrity is the inaccessibility of the authentic private self of the celebrity – it is this distance that opens up the ability for audiences to imaginatively project themselves into a situation where they know the icon. Although this contradictory relationship is well established in celebrity theory, it still confuses some who seek to distinguish celebrity from glamour: 'Celebrity is all about touch; glamour is untouchable' (Wilson, 2007: 101). The vital link being missed here is that both concepts rely on the contradiction of touchable untouchability for their allure. This desire for the celebrity is a fantasy to know the remote, real, natural, authentic or private self of the celebrity when all they are presented with is the remote, surface, synthetic, public self (Rojek, 2001: 46; Gledhill, 1991: 226; Roach, 2005: 17; Dyer, 1987: 12).

Celebrity is not just about an individual, but is also about their relationship to the consumer society they inhabit. For Rojek, the desire for celebrities exists as a 'cult of distraction' that conceals the meaninglessness of modern life whilst reinforcing commodity culture by providing us with images of 'elevation and magic' (2001: 91). These manufactured stars exist as part of commodity culture's cycles of having and wanting and is linked to a sub-conscious absence we feel that is due to the decline of organised religion (2001: 196). For Rojek the desire for celebrities is similar to the desire for commodities in that the consumer is always 'craving transference' (Rojek, 2001: 197). Although Rojek's theory is at times persuasive, it is a depressing condemnation of celebrity and diminishes the positive power such images can communicate. Popular culture can include within it a positive challenge to convention that contributes to change. I also disagree with the idea that individuals are constantly seeking to transfer their celebrity desire to a new subject. It depends on who you consider to be celebrities, something acknowledged in the colloquial designation of A-list or Z-list celebrities; my question is, are the Z-lists really just popular stars? Rojek's study is of the gamut of celebrity types, whereas I am only interested in those who epitomise celebrity desire. Celebrities are those who spark a strong imaginative relationship that lasts decades or even a lifetime. In their most extreme cases they speak of who you are, who you wish to be and the narratives in which you would like to take part. One such star for me is Katherine Hepburn, whose enduring fascination shows no signs of faltering. Those popular stars who are easily replaced are not those who inspire anywhere near such a strong level of identification – they are instead in the realm of the very popular.

Consumer society may provide the conditions for celebrity allure, but it also provides the contradictory elements that create celebrity. The tension between the public presentation of a public face and a private self is why celebrities represent such strong 'figures of identification' for Dyer that help us understand what it is to be an individual in a capitalist society (1979: 111; 1987: 5 & 16). For Dyer their charisma is centrally derived from the contradictions and tensions within the society that they embody (1979: 35; 1991 p.58). The most enduring objects of celebrity fascination have the power to tell us something about culture and society at a particular historical moment. This theory will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4 where I use it as the basis from which to argue that female aerialists embodied a concern regarding gender blurring in the 1920s. Although

Roach does not situate his contradictions as surrounding a societal issue, he does consider the ‘embodiment of contradictory qualities simultaneously’ such as ‘intimacy in public’³¹ to create the magnetic ‘It’ of celebrity (2005: 8 & 175) – a concept that will be further explored in the next section where I examine how skill and risk function in aerial celebrity.

Defining Aerial Celebrity: Performing Public Intimacy as Skilful Vulnerability

Although I have my reservations over the full implications of Rojek’s designation of celebrity as a human commodity within culture, his wide-ranging study of celebrity is useful when considering the central position of skill within aerial celebrity. In defining three major forms of celebrity as ‘ascribed’, ‘achieved’ and ‘attributed’, he acknowledges the methods by which celebrities gain their status: ‘Ascribed celebrity concerns lineage... *achieved* celebrity derives from the perceived accomplishments of the individual in open competition... [whilst attributed] is largely the result of the concentrated representation of an individual as noteworthy or exceptional by cultural intermediaries’ (2001: 17 & 18, italics in original). The first example would include the British royal family, the second includes sports stars who secure fame on the basis of recognised skills and the final category those who come to public attention due to media coverage. Under such a classification system, aerialists are primarily achieved celebrities because they achieve their celebrity by ‘possess[ing] rare talents or skills’ (2001: 18). I am not the first circus scholar to draw on Rojek’s categories; Peta Tait has used them to consider the wire-walker Blondin as an achieved celebrity (2013: 206). This and the emphasis on skill suggests that achieved celebrity may be the primary form of celebrity within the circus. However, there is a complication within Rojek’s writing that is not fully explored. This is that achieved celebrity frequently needs to be attributed as such by media channels – to gain the breadth of coverage required to fuel the public persona, the skilled star must be designated as worthy of attention by the media (2001: 18). This suggests that the significant media interest that accompanies an achieved celebrity always designates them as partly an attributed celebrity. Therefore it may be most accurate to say that that circus performers who gained prominence depending on skill were *primarily* achieved celebrities, but that skill does not tell the whole story. It is the pleasurable tension between skill and

³¹ See p99 for the virtually identical terms used to describe glamour eg ‘accessible exclusivity’ and ‘accessibility and distance’ (Gundle, 2008: 12; Postrel, 2013: 20).

risk in live performance and media coverage that creates the conditions for aerial celebrity.

Most useful in considering this relationship between skill and risk in aerial celebrity is Joseph Roach's theory of 'It'. This is especially so because Roach's particular analysis of celebrity allure draws on the language of glamour in including something 'uncanny' that can be intensified when 'the typifying marks of gender from the opposite sex' are performed (2007: 11). As I do, Roach does see It and glamour as linked but separate concepts, stating 'Most of us also think It entails glamour, and so it does, but not for long' (2007: 1). Roach's theory of It provides a sound foundation for a theory of aerial celebrity and its allure because aerial performance casts a glamour over audience members and this particular type of celebrity draws upon similar sources of power to glamour.

Despite considering celebrity to have emerged in the seventeenth century, it is also fitting that Roach draws inspiration from Elinor Glyn's use of It in the 1920s, linking Glyn to its origins through her reading of Samuel Pepys (2007: 1 & 63). What is interesting is that in one of his first definitions of the appeal of It, Roach draws on the risk of falling in the circus to discuss the role of tension in creating the excitement of experiencing celebrity:

"It" is the power of apparently effortless embodiment of contradictory qualities simultaneously: strength *and* vulnerability, innocence *and* experience, and singularity *and* typicality among them. The possessor of It keeps a precarious balance between such mutually exclusive alternatives, suspended at the tipping point like a tightrope dancer on one foot; and the empathic tension of waiting for the apparently inevitable fall makes for breathless spectatorship: hence Glyn's location of a psychological contradiction with reversible polarities like egoless self-confidence or unbiddable, magnetism at the source of the mysterious fascination of It (Roach, 2007: 8, emphasis in original).

Although It does depend on other oppositions, strength and vulnerability hold a central position in It, because these two alternatives create the synthetic experience of 'public intimacy' (Roach, 2005: 16 & 19; 2007: 16–17).³²

In describing public intimacy, Roach uses religion and religious terminology as a way of considering how the enchantment of It is created. He positions celebrities as secular

³² Rojek uses the similar term 'presumed intimacy' in his study of the same name, considering how mediated relationships control today's information rich society and are constructed between figures that range from online friends to public figures including celebrities (2016).

icons and public intimacy as connecting the secular desire for celebrities to the enchantment of saints, who were ‘accessible to ordinary mortals even as they communicated with the divine... the very tension between their widespread visibility and their actual remoteness creates an unfulfilled need in the hearts of the public’ (Roach, 2007: 16–17). What this means for celebrities is that they need to perform an expert balancing act: they need to be accessible enough to the public that an imaginative relationship can be created, yet remote enough that the distance leaves room for both admiration and a lack of fulfilment. This lack left in its wake is accompanied by a yearning for resolution that is at the heart of celebrity desire. He draws further upon religious terminology to describe the relationship between strength and vulnerability in public intimacy, in language that is strangely fitting for the muscular performances of aerialists:

As their sacred images circulate in the demotic swirl of the profane imagination, celebrities foreground a peculiar combination of strength and vulnerability, expressed through outwards signs of the union of their imperishable and mortal bodies. Let those marks of strength be called *charismata*; the signs of vulnerability, *stigmata*. They work cooperatively, like muscles in opposable pairs, and their beguiling interplay, ...has a long history as well as popular currency as the source of public intimacy (2005: 24, emphasis in original; similar text in 2007: 36).

Roach later uses the example of Sarah Siddons’ return to the stage when she was suffering speech and mobility problems to highlight how vulnerability can destroy the celebrity image by overpowering strength (2005, 226; 2007, 39). Here was a star who destroyed her iconic image as ‘the tragedy queen’ by appearing too perishable, too accessible to her public (Roach, 2007: 40). Yet, it is interesting that the dominant after-image of Siddons today is that of the great Siddons, the tragedy queen. I consider that an over emphasis on vulnerability does not completely obliterate the celebrity image but temporarily pushes it into notoriety.

Public intimacy with its relationship between *charismata* strength and *stigmata* vulnerability is effective when applied to the relationship between skill and risk in aerial celebrity, but it does require an expansion of the scope of the terms. If strength is what is considered to separate us from the celebrity and inspire admiration, then skill is the biggest strength of an aerialist. Skill encompasses strength for an aerialist as the movements rely on the expert control of muscles made strong by aerial movement. Vulnerability also takes on a different configuration for aerialists because a body situated in a space above is one that appears at risk of falling, potentially to its death. It is this life-risking vulnerability for a

public that has the ability to provoke a strange feeling of intimacy when controlled. Jennifer Doyle reflects upon the strange feeling of concern and intimacy she felt when she witnessed Franko B walk alone through the Tate bleeding during *I Miss You* (2005: 43–44). She understands that this Live Artist knows what he is doing – just like the aerialist – but is still concerned for his wellbeing. She draws the link between a performance that risks death and intimacy, stating ‘It is about death, some might say, but only as the threat implied by love’ (2005: 44). It is about love as well as death because true intimacy is risky. Franko B may be contemporary high art as opposed to historical popular culture, but the logic holds because experiencing aerial performance inspires a similar visceral relationship of bodily identification. Franko B and circus performers also share another feature: both dramatise the relationship between public and private by appearing as their ‘real’ selves or public persona, unfettered by an acted role. Expanding Roach’s strength to skill and vulnerability to include risk is appropriate because in doing so the experience remains one that generates intimacy in public.

The appropriate balancing act of risk and skill in aerial performance is also central to showmanship: skill is the enjoyment derived from displays of virtuosity that has to be managed to prevent the aerialist appearing too superhuman, and risk with its intimacy draws the audience in whilst inspiring excitement. Yet, skill also has the power to present moments as dangerous and risk to highlight skill. Too much skill and the performance is boring, too much risk and the concern for the aerialist becomes unpleasant rather than generating excitement. What is required for It to be generated is ‘an aura of wonder and a frisson of transgression’ or, in aerial celebrity, danger (Roach, 2007: 183). However, this balancing act is always a performance: risk and skill are always managed and presented by skilled aerialists. Because this is a skill itself, I choose to describe the correct balancing as creating public intimacy through skilful vulnerability. Circus scholarship does acknowledge the performance of ‘real’ and ‘perceived’ risks and the inclusion of ‘staged failure... to stress the difficulty and danger of their stunt’ (Carter, 2014: 87; Bouissac, 2010: 93), yet the relationship between performances of risk *and* skill are not dealt with in any detail. The most detailed analysis of risk in aerial performance describes the paradox as being that the performance of risk is also a performance of safety (dependent on skill), considering circus to frequently reflect how risk is perceived in wider society (Tait, 2016). A core element of expert circus showmanship is the correct balancing of skill and risk for audience enjoyment, so that one does not overpower the other. In terms of circus

celebrity and showmanship, the muscles that work in opposable pairs to create public intimacy within aerial celebrity are therefore *charismata* skill and *stigmata* vulnerability created by actual and performed risk.

Riskily Gendered Female

Before beginning an analysis of the relationship between risk and skill in the specific performances of Leers and Leitzel it is necessary to reflect on how risk and skill are gendered. In performance a mortal female body united both Leers and Leitzel and contributed to their success because it reflected how riskily their bodies were received in the precarious space between earth and sky. Although not apparent in contemporary reports from the period, the female body at risk on aerial equipment was perceived differently to the male body in the late nineteenth century due to its capacity for motherhood ('Amusements for the People', 1868). The rhetoric around female exercise for creating healthy mothers in the 1920s (see Chapter 5) suggests that a female body would still have inspired a heightened impression of risk. This is confirmed by Judy Burns' description of how a female body using aerial dance equipment was received differently in the 1990s: it 'ups the ante on the spectacle, giving a distinctly gendered spin on spectacle's promises of the larger-than-life, the defiance of "natural" law' (1994: 100). Even though most female performers I know today may wish to appear on a level playing field with men, society has not reached a point where we can escape such a gendered response to viewing a female body at risk – the rhetoric of potential motherhood still has power. Presenting a female body rather than a male body on aerial equipment in the 1920s did suggest a higher level of vulnerability.

Other 1920s female circus performers such as equestriennes were similarly playing with performed risk as they sped around the circus ring on horseback, but I consider there to be an important visual difference in aerial performance that emphasises risk. There is something different about a female body dangling in a space so high above: the distance between ground and performer is always visible, accentuated by how insignificant the equipment appears. This vulnerable female body placed at risk from falling such a large distance to the ground is key to the female aerialist's vulnerability and celebrity: to perform on aerial equipment with a female body was to perform risk in the 1920s and early 1930s because female aerial soloists performed acts that were at least as skilled, if not more so, than their male counterparts.

Luisita Leers: Certainly Skilled, but Risky Enough?

Although Luisita Leers was a popular centre ring Ringling-Barnum performer who was honoured in 1933 with having competing action stopped when she performed her solo static trapeze act (Leers, 1933: 3), she never quite achieved the considerable stardom of Lillian Leitzel. This makes her act somewhat harder to reconstruct, particularly because her career was affected by the Depression, issues within the circus industry and the Second World War. In performance Leers' body is recorded as inspiring vulnerability in press reports, with the audience 'palpably more concerned for Miss Leers' safety than she was for her own'. The argument I am making is that Leers' 'iron nerve and exceptional skill', noted in the same report, diminished the spectacular vulnerability of her body ('Mary M'Cormic', 1933). Leers was a virtuoso on her chosen equipment who, like Leitzel, concluded her act with an endurance feat – in Leers' case up to 100 elbow rolls or muscle grinds ('Luisita Leers - Seventeen', 1953: 13). The comparison between Leitzel and Leers made by the Ringling-Barnum press agent Dexter Fellows to circus fan Sverre O Braathen, reveals how skilled Leers was: 'Dexter made the remark that you were a much greater aerialist than Leitzel. Now how is that for a pat on the back from one who has seen all the greats come and go during the past forty three years' (1936: 2). What is interesting is that someone so skilled chose to include an endurance feat rather than an exhibition of skill to conclude her act. For this reason, I compare Leers' feat to Leitzel's planche turns to consider how the elbow rolls were framed and how risk was performed within it. Leers' and Braathen's correspondence represents a key resource as it demonstrates where the audience's perception differed from the aerialist's experience of risk and skill – as such it highlights that risk and skill in aerial acts are not accurately perceived by audience members.

A description of Leers' act written by Braathen for a local radio broadcast devoted to her performance and career, shows that the announcer framed her act before she made her one ascent to the static trapeze, stating: 'The super-sensation of all Europe; The wonder girl; a youthful aerialist of prodigious strength and amazing skill, in a trapeze offering that has astounded two continents' (1933: 2). I consider it likely that in the 1933 season where all action was stopped in other circus spaces, if not before, that Leers' endurance feat would also have been announced. This endurance feat is what I have heard described as an elbow roll in my own aerial training, but what Leers described as a muscle grind. Essentially this involves positioning the trapeze around the mid-back area just under the

shoulder blades, with hands holding the trapeze bar and the body braced against it. Gravity is then used to create the momentum with which to begin the revolution: the body uses a slight v-shape when it is positioned above the bar to tip forward and create enough momentum to continue the revolution by curving the body up and over the trapeze bar. The body speeds forward as gravity acts upon the body and slows to create the gravity to continue each revolution by pushing up and over the trapeze bar. The movement essentially involves a taut body and the alteration of the centre of gravity to continue each revolution.

This tautness in the body and the way in which it speeds and slows in response to gravity gives elbow rolls a strangely controlled appearance as an act of endurance. In America, Leers appeared alongside Leitzel (until her death in 1931) whose act of endurance, the planche turns, have already been described as violent. Leers may have been performing risk by including a feat that looked impressive through its perpetual continuation, but it was one that also looked safer. It made less of a spectacle of Leers' body as vulnerable than Leitzel's frenetic planche turns, that performed risk to a lesser extent.

In performance Leers may have appeared to be pushing her body to its very limits for the excitement of her audience, but this was a misconception she dispelled in personal correspondence. Leers makes clear that aerialists such as herself and Leitzel worked safely within their limits: 'The most times I turned over in my muscle grind. *[sic]* where *[sic]* 139, I think I maybe could do about 180 but naturally not every day, my arms would get too sore and it would make me to *[sic]* tired' (1933: 2). Leers could have performed up to 180 elbow rolls but instead chose to perform 100. She was not putting her body dangerously at risk as any announcer might frame it, but instead was working well within her skill limits. That did not mean her body was immune to the effects of the bar rubbing against her skin, it did hurt, she just chose how much her body could bear on a regular basis. Although performing elbow rolls was placing her body at risk, it was performed as more risky than it actually was by being framed as a test of endurance.

Leers' success was confirmed by her endurance act being copied, but this brought with it other problems related to the perception of risk when that copy was a fake. In the same correspondence, Leers asks Braathen to 'tell the people in some way that I do the muscle grind really by myself, as now some lady's tried to this *[sic]* part of my act and now do the

muscle grind on a revolving trapeze,’ (1933: 2, emphasis in original). She goes on to describe how this performer would hang on to a second bar that passively revolved her body around the first trapeze bar – the second bar allowing a faster speed to be achieved than Leers’ body was capable of creating. Tait considers that Leers’ ‘muscularity provides proof of authentic action’ (2005: 80) when it was compared to the faked action. Even if this was the case, the problem still remained that some audience members may have doubted the reality of the risk she put her body under if they understood the fakery involved in the copy – as a result Leers’ endurance act would also have appeared less impressive and therefore less risky. Following Leers’ letter Braathen did state that she performed the elbow roll unaided in his local radio broadcast (1933: 4–5) whilst newspaper coverage highlighted she used a ‘non-revolving bar’ (‘Mary M’Cormic’, 1933: 14). Although this might have influenced how some audience members received Leers’ act there is no indication that she altered her live performance to emphasise that her body riskily completed the revolutions unaided.

The correspondence between Leers and circus fan Sverre O Braathen lasted many years and is revealing for the insights it provides about risk and showmanship. The same letter where Leers describes being copied also describes how this impressive endurance feat was not the most risky part of her act: ‘The most difficult part of my act is the neck hang with the split, you know a trapeze is street [*sic*] and the neck is round so there is just so very little place to hang by and it makes is [*sic*] still so much harder, when I take the one leg to make that split’ (1933: 2). The small point of contact provided by the straight trapeze and a round neck made it difficult to balance, but the shift in her centre of gravity made it even harder to maintain balance as the leg was brought up into a side splits. I would be surprised if this act was not emphasised by the announcer in performance once Leers appeared alone in the centre ring. However, this would have been the only way for the audience to see the full extent of the real risk she was subjecting herself to. In the previous chapter I demonstrated how aerial performance hides effort but the problem is actually more complex because it can also obscure the actual sites of risk and skill. The neck hang may have required the highest level of skill and control, but that was actually part of the problem: control is the opposite of risk because control suggests safety. Although control is a characteristic of the elbow roll, the ability to count the revolutions made the feat much easier to appreciate as risky if you did not have the benefit of in depth aerial understanding, due to the endurance required.

Letters written by Braathen to Leers dwell upon the showmanship she presented in her act in slightly different terms. Braathen states that: 'Mrs Braathen and I both agree that you have improved so much from the time we first saw you. You have added so much more color and showmanship to your act. You seem to enjoy your work more than when you first came on to the show' (1932b: 2). He goes on in a later letter to add to this description saying: 'In other words you do more to sell your act to the public' (1932c: 2). For Braathen showmanship takes the form of selling her act to the public and demonstrating more enjoyment. This selling of her act could well have taken the form of presenting risk and skill more adeptly. However, the demonstration of enjoyment is also significant. Enjoyment functions in a complex way within showmanship: it establishes a closer connection to the audience, and it presents the activities as easy and safe enough to not be worthy of worry. This performance of enjoyment in aerial performance holds a strange position in relation to risk. It reduces the appearance of risk by the aerialist indicating the movements are easy. However, most audience members are aware that they could not perform the same movements, simultaneously making the aerialist demonstrating enjoyment skilled for finding the actions so easy. This enjoyment is key to creating the frisson of excitement that ensures we enjoy the experience and do not truly fear for the life of the aerialist. The presentation of enjoyment in showmanship acts as a reassuring performance of skill, despite its associations with ease.

The correspondence between Leers and Braathen demonstrates that risk and skill are obscured in aerial performance and provides a reason why Luisita Leers did not achieve celebrity status. Risk and skill are not perceived accurately by audience members unless they have the benefit of critical aerial understanding – aerial action is a performance of risk and skill because the form obscures these designations. In relationship to celebrity, skill and risk provide an explanation why the virtuosic Leers did not achieve the considerable celebrity of Leitzel, despite being copied by her contemporaries and honoured to appear alone in the Ringling-Barnum circus space. The performance of risk reveals one of the reasons why this may have been the case: Leers' showmanship did not quite display the level of performed risk required to fully capture the imagination of an audience less skilled in identifying and appreciating her virtuosity – particularly when this virtuosity was not always clearly signposted to audiences in performance. Her act always tended to tip further towards *charismata* skill, with not enough *stigmata* risk to provide the

perfect balance point where the frisson of safe excitement could be turned into aerial celebrity.

Lillian Leitzel: Expert Showman & Preeminent Circus Celebrity

The most significant circus celebrity of the 1920s was Lillian Leitzel, who created public intimacy from an act and media image that expertly balanced her *charismata* skill with *stigmata* vulnerability created by actual and performed risk. The following reconstruction of her performance is informed by my own practice and is created from a combination of video footage, descriptions in memoirs and contemporary newspaper coverage. The analysis focuses on the planche turn so closely associated with Leitzel, beginning with elements that broadly emphasised her body at risk and followed by those that broadly emphasised her skill. The discussion explores the interconnectedness of the two concepts of risk and skill in expert showmanship, first in performance and later in media coverage. This discussion reveals how the same elements in performance could hold a different relationship to risk and skill in print. It also situates the presentation of risk as a core aesthetic of aerial performance.

The Planche Turn: Showmanship & Performing *Stigmata* Risk

A cursory analysis of Lillian Leitzel's act suggests a misleadingly clear-cut relationship between risk and skill in the construction of her performance. As noted in the previous chapter, Leitzel's act broadly comprised two sections: a graceful set on roman rings and the risky planche turns that concluded her act by functioning as a feat of endurance. This first section is described by memoir writers as an 'exquisite gymnastic turn' (Pond, 1948b: 124) where Leitzel demonstrated her 'artistry' (North and Hatch, 2008: 184; Manning-Sanders, 1952: 242), yet the planche turns are considered the risky 'stunt' (Pond, 1948b: 124). Despite artistic merit – or skill – being most evident to memoir writers in the first section of her act, this risky 'stunt' is designated as the feat through which she attained her 'stardom' by Fred Bradna (1953: 156). Bradna wrote his memoir as one of Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey's most famous Equestrian Directors and a man who understood the internal workings of the circus. Therefore it is the planche turns that form the main focus of my consideration of how Leitzel became the most successful circus celebrity of the 1920s, by creating public intimacy through performing the perfect balance of risk and skill – skilful vulnerability – for audience members' enjoyment.

This second section of the act began when Leitzel's feet touched the ground following her descent from her roman rings. Whilst her maid arranged her hair and clothing the announcer framed her act emphasising the 'test of endurance' (Pond, 1948b: 124), concluding with 'Miss Lillian Leitzel, the only living person to perform this feat!' (Kline, 2008: 209). As the announcer finished, Leitzel slipped her hand into the wrist strap located at the bottom of the planche rope, securing the safety loop tightly around her wrist. With this secure, the property men on the other end of the planche rope began to haul on the free end, using a pulley system to whisk Leitzel's body into the air - her body only jerking to a stop when the plunger on the rope hit the pulley at the top of the space (Kline, 2008: 209; 'Home video of Leitzel', n.d.). Pausing for a second, she struck a balletic pose before beginning to swing her body by kicking her heels back and forth ('Home video of Leitzel', n.d.). The swaying and scissoring actions of her legs helped her create the momentum to project her body into the planche turn revolutions – her body creating each turn by casting itself over her shoulder repeatedly using her wrist as a pivot.

Framed as an act of risky endurance it was important the audience were aware of exactly how many planche turns were performed: to know whether it was 60 or 100 revolutions. The audience was kept aware of Leitzel's progress through the announcer's counting as she completed each full revolution, an activity which inevitably encouraged the audience to do the same and that I have already shown linked them perceptually to her body (Kline, 2008: 209; Bradna and Spence, 1953: 150). The tension was further heightened by the frenetic accompaniment of Rimsky-Korsakov's 'The Flight of the Bumblebee' by the circus band and the beating of a bass drum at the conclusion of each turn. In the last five years of Leitzel's career, when she adjusted her act to complete 60 revolutions, the accompaniment took on a slightly less frenetic attitude as Ringling-Barnum bandmaster Merle Evans scored a special arrangement of 'The Dance of the Hours' from *La Gioconda* by Amilcare Ponchielli (Bradna and Spence, 1953: 150). The staccato notes of 'The Dance of the Hours' still emphasised each turn, just with a little more lightness and a little less frenzy.

Aerial performance derives some of its frisson of excitement from the possibility of seeing a performer fall to their death – in seeing their body as vulnerable. The excitement in watching the aerialist draws on imaginative and somatic responses. Recalling the previous chapter's discussion of how aerial action is read through the kinaesthetic

system, Foster considers the audience member to feel fright based on the rehearsed simulation of a fall in the related discipline of tight-rope walking (2011: 166). Relating this to my own experiences of aerial performance, I am not fully satisfied by this explanation. Foster herself describes how ‘the tuning of the self and the world sets the precondition for a variety of possible responses’ (2011: 166). This leads me to state that because it is very rare a fall will occur, it is a little more complex – we rehearse both possibilities: the free, weightless movement and the risk of falling.³³ This experience of risk as implying a sense of possibilities is noted in other fields of performance as transformative in suggesting both ‘gain and loss in the same moment’ (MacDonald, 1996: viii). No one wants to be in an audience that actually witnesses a traumatic fall that results in death or injury, such as Leitzel’s death as a result of equipment failure in 1931, but there is an excitement in its somatically imagined possibility. The thrill comes from seeing the vulnerable performer using their skill to triumph over the possibility of death – an experience that highlights the presence of the performer and the exciting liveness of the performance event. The audience wants to engage in a fiction that the activities aerialists perform are more risky, that they are more vulnerable than they truly are, and that the aerialist really is pushing their body to its very limits to excite them. Even if, away from the moment of performance, everyone knows that the fiction is unrealistic and that to earn your living every day from pushing yourself that close to death would be stupid.

The reality of the situation is that closeness to death is a fiction and that safety precautions hold danger at a distance. In the description of her planche turns above there is one clear safety precaution that is not hidden from audience members, although only the initiated would be likely to consider the full significance of the moment when Leitzel pulled the safety loop securely around her wrist. Without such a loop secured, Leitzel would probably have been forced from the rope by the jerkiness of the planche turns, but with it safely secured she would be able to adjust her grip without letting go of the rope. Hidden from the audience within the same description is another safety precaution: Leitzel’s deliberate choice to reduce the number of revolutions commonly performed in the last five years of her life as age forced her to adapt her act. Her performance was one

³³ Amy Meyer’s MA thesis draws on Ulrich Beck’s theories of risk to consider circus risk as demonstrating both success and failure, further supporting this conclusion. Although Meyer also draws on Foster’s theories of kinaesthetic empathy, the relationship between the performance of risk, skill, intimacy and experience of risk are never fully interrogated or linked (2014).

where safety precautions were most commonly hidden from audience members to preserve the fiction that the planche turns were a dance with death.

Moving away from the planche turns for just one moment, the earlier section of her act where she applied rosin to aid grip is revealing when considering the relationship between safety precautions and the presentation of risk. Throughout her career Leitzel used two different methods of applying rosin. Visible in the Codona Family Collection video shot towards the end of her career after she married Alfredo Codona, Leitzel camouflages within the seductive gyrations she makes before climbing to her rings, the action of breaking rosin into pieces which she then rubs onto her hands ('Home video of Leitzel', n.d.). Fellow Ringling-Barnum aerialist Tiny Kline, whose descriptions of Leitzel's act appear to date earlier, recounts another method by which she applied the rosin:

Reaching into her bodice, she produced a tiny, white powder-puff, then proceeded to dust her hands in an apparent act of coquetry. The real purpose, which only aerial performers grasped, was powdered rosin for gripping. She concluded by dropping the cloudlike puff, which floated downward, visible in the floodlight. This, too, was part of the presentation, accentuating as it did for the benefit of the audience the great space between her and the ground below (2008: 209).

Kline's observation that the general public would not have recognised the safety precaution hidden in an act of self-consciously performed femininity is relevant to both applications of rosin. However, what is most interesting is her perceptive statement that Leitzel accentuated the distance between the earth and her body as 'part of the presentation' – in highlighting the distance, she highlighted the vulnerability of her body to falling. In Kline's statement is the reality that risk is an element of performance that is available for manipulation.

Leitzel's showmanship and her success were founded on how she deliberately performed risk in her act, particularly during the planche turns that made her so successful.

Performed risk is invoked as the announcer frames the planche turns as 'endurance', a classification that immediately indicates increased risk, and when he designated Leitzel as the only person in the world capable of executing them.³⁴ Performed risk is also visible in the jerk that makes Leitzel's body appear vulnerable and distant as the plunger hit the

³⁴ When Leitzel was later copied the announcer may have found another method of highlighting her body at risk, although Carmelli notes that in circus tradition these differentiating and self-aggrandising claims are not necessarily founded on truth (1990: 203).

pulley. Leitzel could have performed lower in the circus tent but made the choice to appear at the very top of the performance space. I am also certain that it would have been possible to pull her to the top of the circus tent without causing such a jerk. Performed risk is also visible in the fact that Leitzel is vulnerable to the men who hoist her, hold her, and lower her to the ground at the conclusion of her act. It is also interesting that the planche rope was temporarily pulled into position rather than being permanently rigged as her roman rings were. It is clear that a number of deliberate decisions were made with the aim that the planche turns should be framed as risky. These choices regarding rigging and the announcers' introductory statement function as a performance of risk, that made Leitzel's body appear vulnerable, to heighten excitement for audience members and to emphasise her skill.

Leitzel's body appeared most vulnerable during the performed faint she used on special occasions when exiting the ring. This most explicit performance of vulnerability is given its most lengthy description by Robert Lewis Taylor in his typically flamboyant language:

Quite early, having learned that the crowd's response to a faint was about like the ancient Roman's enjoyment of lions on a Christian diet, she placed herself on a permanently wobbly footing. After a wrenching ordeal, she would leave the ring in convoy with the faithful Clemings [her maid], at a gait verging on the blind staggers. She would proceed with gusto for three or four paces, falter, place a hand on her heart, and seem headed for a nose-dive to the turf. As the maid leaped to the rescue (throughout their relationship, Miss Clemings never knew, she said, whether Miss Leitzel was sincere or about to chuck a dummy [*sic*]) the artist's whim was to haul herself up, assume a brave but stricken look, and thrust forward a restraining hand. At this display of girlish heroism, the crowd went wild. It was as if a favorite halfback, repelling the entreaties of his coach, had insisted on continuing with a fractured skull (1956: 220).

By performing the planche turns as having such a profound effect on her body, Leitzel was framing the act as more physically demanding and risky than it truly was. Taylor is not the only person to consider Leitzel to have performed this as a knowing act of showmanship. Fred Bradna describes how John Ringling warned him about 'Leitzel's trick of simulating a faint at the end of her act, if important celebrities were in the house' when Bradna and Leitzel first started working together (1953: 154). Bradna goes on to say that 'Mr John's position was that such a spectacle was unfair to the other artists' (1953: 154). Leitzel clearly equated the faint with giving a particularly crowd-pleasing performance that accentuated her star status even if it risked the annoyance of the Ringling management by detracting from other performances. Leitzel knowingly used the performance of her body as more vulnerable or at risk than it truly was as a tool of

showmanship – an element of her act that could be accentuated when a particularly special performance and audience response was required.

In Leitzel's performance there is an interesting relationship between actual and performed risk. The mitigation of actual risk in Leitzel's act is hidden from audience members, frequently under a self-conscious performance of femininity such as the application of rosin using the powder-puff. Femininity itself is more traditionally equated with vulnerability and masculinity with strength. It is therefore, interesting that Leitzel chooses to disguise the evidence of safety under feminine signifiers more commonly equated with vulnerability, whilst risk itself is performed with the aim of presenting her body as similarly vulnerable. However, as Roach has highlighted, too much *stigmata* vulnerability and the celebrity becomes overpowered. Skill as *charismata* needs to be strong enough to maintain the desirable distance of public intimacy as skilful vulnerability.

The Planche Turn: Showmanship & the Balancing of *Charismata* Skill

If the aim is for the fiction of death to be played with, then the level of skill on display and the impression of weightlessness may be a reason Leitzel framed her body as vulnerable. Although aerial performance requires considerable muscular development and bodily control, it creates the appearance of weightlessness. The most engaging performers, like Leitzel, are often lauded for showmanship that makes it seem 'easy' (Kline, 2008: 209; Bradna and Spence, 1953: 150). The ease with which Leitzel performed was accentuated by her unusual presentation of enjoyment; whereas most aerialists performed with blank faces, photographs of Leitzel capture her euphoric smile as she performed her exhilarating planche turns (Atwell, 1930b; Atwell, 1930a). The apparent easiness displayed by skilled performers such as Leitzel makes aerial acts appear less skilled and therefore less risky. This further illuminates the necessary relationship between risk and skill: performing the body as vulnerable makes it appear at risk to inspire audience excitement, but it also functions to emphasise skill when this might be hidden by the apparent easiness of skilled aerial display.

Although the announcer's designation of Leitzel's performance as a 'test of endurance' did frame the planche turns as the most dangerous part of her act, endurance feats can appear easier than they truly are – at the same time as appearing impressive they can become peculiarly hypnotic. When watching film of Leitzel performing her planche

turns, it is easy to disengage from the effort required to perform each turn (DeBaugh, n.d.; 'Home video of Leitzel', n.d.). This disengagement can be seen in contemporary reports of her act where she is described: to 'whirl' ('Palladium', 1929) rather than expend effort; she 'twirled in space like gyroscope' losing her humanity as her body is equated to a mechanical toy ('7,000 Circus Hungry', 1921: 7); 'until she has the spectators dizzy' their eyes unable to clearly see the work she is undertaking ('Circus Acrobat's Fear', 1921: 8). This disengagement from Leitzel's body and from the effort required to perform the feat led more than one memoir writer to describe the danger of the stunt becoming monotonous (Pond, 1948b: 124; Bradna and Spence, 1953: 150). Once Leitzel gained momentum the skill, apparent ease and enjoyment with which she executed the planche turns made her body appear weightless and the trick appear less dangerous. The same memoir writers consider duration to be key to maintaining audience engagement and interest. In particular it was the experience of wondering precisely how many times and how long she could continue – something Leitzel managed within her act through the audience counting each full revolution.

Audience counting functioned in a number of ways as an effective tool of showmanship within Leitzel's act: it highlighted the impressiveness of the feat executed, the danger associated with the feat and linked the audience directly to the activity. Fred Bradna makes the direct correlation between audience counting and engagement when he states: 'As her body rolled over and over, the effect was saved from monotony only because the crowd counted the turns and wondered how many she would execute that day' (1953: 150). Audience counting made the audience complicit because they spoke numbers from bodies situated on the ground that appeared to drive Leitzel's activity above. Although most frequently the question in the audience members mind is stated as 'how many' or 'how long' by memoir writers (Bradna and Spence, 1953: 150; Pond, 1948b: 124), the unspoken question was: would Leitzel continue if we the audience, were not providing her with the benchmark by which to judge her performance? Audience counting created a direct connection between the audience and Leitzel, engaging them in the danger and risk in the activity rather than letting them be distanced by the hypnotic nature of the endurance feat. It therefore contributed to the performance of risk whilst emphasising her strength and her skill.

The way in which Leitzel performed just the right amount of risk in her act, balanced by the right amount of skill, demonstrates she was an expert showman who knew her audience well. Evidence demonstrates that Leitzel was the controlling force behind her act and the compensation she received for it. Circus historian Fred Pfening Jnr describes Leitzel as 'hard-nosed' in her negotiations with John and Charles Ringling for the 1917 tenting season (2003: 4). Using telegrams he reveals how she used a break in her contract to negotiate a larger stateroom on the circus train. Bradna describes how she 'was a genius at wheedling favours from the management, and more than any other person is responsible for the great change from sordid to sumptuous living quarters for which all latter-day stars must bless her memory' (1953: 151). Kline also describes how Leitzel discouraged competition by preventing Kline from performing centre ring on roman rings for just one performance when Kline's rigging was damaged (2008: 243–4). This was a woman in control not only of her own act, but the compensation she gained from it and the positioning it received within the wider circus programme.

Considering Leitzel as an astute business person and showman throws a different light on the planche turns and her presentation of skill. Memoir writers who consider themselves circus experts tend to highlight the artistry in the first roman rings section of her act and denigrate the planche turns. They describe the planche turns as 'common stunting' or situate them as purely crowd-pleasing (North and Hatch, 2008: 184; Manning-Sanders, 1952: 242). Leitzel was an expert on aerial equipment yet she chose to include a trick that was simple to understand if you did not have the criteria with which to judge aerial expertise. It was also a feat that helped Leitzel stand out from other aerialists and could be marketed by circus impresarios. This search for a simpler method of understanding the feat that could be widely appreciated by all audience members without the benefit of aerial understanding is reflected in the description used in newspaper coverage. Contemporary newspaper coverage leaves behind the specificity of the circus term planche turn for 'giant swings', a term that is more broadly descriptive ('World's Greatest Aerial', 1919: p.21; 'Girl Greatest of All', 1919: 7; 'Mite of a Woman', 1920: 23). When watching in the audience, any audience member would be able to identify the advertised moment clearly and be caught up in the excitement each revolution of Leitzel's body created. The inclusion of the planche turn within her act was a shrewd business decision and one that helped propel Leitzel and her act to fame.

Leitzel was an expert showman who demonstrated precisely the right level of charisma and stigmata in her act – the contradictory elements of skill and vulnerability that created the public intimacy on which her aerial celebrity was founded. Her strength was not just the great skill with which she performed on her equipment but also the way in which she performed her body as vulnerable. This was achieved through the construction of her act to include an endurance feat that made her body appear more vulnerable than it truly was. She performed risk by hiding safety precautions such as the application of rosin to aid grip within self-conscious performances of femininity, through elements such as her body jerking at the top of the performance space and audience counting. To most audience members who were not equipped with aerial understanding, the performance of risk presented her body as vulnerable and also functioned as a performance of skill – it highlighted skill that could easily be hidden by the apparent easiness and enjoyment Leitzel displayed. The choice of including an endurance feat easily comprehensible as ‘giant swings’ to audience members who did not have detailed aerial understanding was integral to her success. Although Leitzel was a showman who expertly balanced skilful vulnerability in her act, to situate her as a celebrity her image has to be examined beyond the circus ring through newspaper reports.

Risk & Skill in Media Coverage of Leitzel

The newspaper coverage of Leitzel does not provide one clear image of the woman behind the act. Analysing this media coverage for how it constructs Leitzel’s celebrity through discussions of risk and skill, I find myself wishing for one voice to emerge so that I can clearly identify the person whose act I know so well: I want to find her private voice amongst the public media presentation. This futile wish demonstrates the allure Roach identifies in the contradictions presented by stars. The discrepancies are no doubt due to her long career with Ringling-Barnum where the majority of coverage would have been secured and written by press agents in the USA. Perhaps this and any rewriting conducted by newspaper men is also what is responsible for the inaccuracies about equipment that occur, although Leitzel’s control of conditions backstage suggests she would not be completely ignorant of her presentation in media.

This contradiction is present in the positioning of risk and skill within Leitzel’s act and personality in local press coverage, although it is generally gendered to emphasise risk. After describing Leitzel’s ‘strength, skill and endurance’, one article attributes words to Leitzel that position her act as particularly risky and as having an extreme effect on her

body: 'I sometimes get horribly afraid... It is true, as any one [*sic*] can see who watches me, that every time I do my act I take my life in my hands. ...I had finished my act... so weak, exhausted and out of breath I could cry' ('All Circusgoers', 1921). The majority of this article is devoted to the physical effects of her act on her body, presenting her as vulnerable and as suffering for her act and therefore her audience. This act of emphasising risk causes the effect of increasing awe in the reader, further highlighting her skill. However, this was not a consistent message presented by Leitzel and the Ringling-Barnum press agents as other briefer local coverage placed via the press book system designated her profession as holding no fears: 'To most girls the experience of flying about at thhe [*sic*] end of a rope fixed at the very top of the circus tent, where the slightest miscalculation might result in serious injury, would furnish thrills enough to last them an ordinary lifetime. Not so with the daring Lillian Leitzel. She regards her occupation as a rather tame one' ('Girl Too Daring', 1922; similar text also in 'Can't Fly in Plane' 1921; 'Too Daring Even' 1922). In describing Leitzel as needing thrills beyond her act there is still an emphasis on the risk Leitzel subjects herself to – she again is positioned as vulnerable and her act as spectacularly risky.

Longer feature articles in national publications provide more complex representations of risk and skill within her image. Skill is described in terms of strength, training and the difficulty of feats across the five main American feature articles discovered in the course of this research (Paulinetti, 1923: 37, 38, 39 & 40–41; Williams, 1923; Fellows, 1923: 12; Queed, 1926: 49 & 50; Bradshaw, 1931: 16 & 18). Difficulty is emphasised through: her claim she can never risk resting lest she lose her strength (Williams, 1923: 32; Fellows, 1923: 13; Queed, 1926: 51); and descriptions that state how few people can complete certain movements she presents within her act (Paulinetti, 1923: 38, 39 & 40; Queed, 1926: 51). These highlight where Leitzel is the only woman or person who can complete the action in a similar way as the announcer's words framed her movements in performance. Even in *Beautiful Womanhood* where skill appears to be less important than Leitzel's apparent weightlessness, the planche turns follow any mention of defying the 'laws of gravity' in similar terms as 'a stunt that to do even once would tax many a seasoned athlete' (Fellows, 1923: 12 & 13). In first emphasising weightlessness and then highlighting difficulty, apparent weightlessness is reframed as part of skill.

Two articles published in 1923 in physical culture publications focus in detail on the movements being performed to emphasise Leitzel's skill (Paulinetti, 1923; Williams, 1923). In *Strength*, the author PH Paulinetti is described as a retired performer who uses his position as authority on aerial movement to provide readers with an informed eye through which to view her 'immeasurably superior' abilities (1923: 37). Paulinetti provides an invitation to audience members 'To get a slight idea of the difficulty' by conducting a similar action to the one-arm planche, one that I recognise from my own training as a conditioning movement used in preparation of the pose (1923: 39). In *Physical Culture* pictures taken with furniture are accompanied by captions that often invite the reader to try them out for their own physical benefit, such as: 'These photographs illustrate an exercise that you can enjoy as much as will the children, and which is an ideal movement for strengthening the back' (Williams, 1923: 30). The purpose in *Physical Culture* may appear to be to invite audience members to learn strength from Leitzel, but the end effect is similar to that of *Strength*. In both cases audience members reading the description or viewing images would have imaginatively positioned themselves in Leitzel's place – a process of identification that emphasised her skill and forced them to evaluate the great distance between her body's capabilities and their own.

Safety precautions hold an ambiguous position in newspaper reports that is different to their position in the moment of performance. Instead of the activity being hidden it is exposed to provide access to the private self as well as to highlight risk, whether that is the absence of a safety requirement or its use. The application of rosin and the absence of a net are mentioned in two feature articles, one written before and one after her death – as such the latter article fetishises a safety precaution that could have saved her life and one that did not (Queed: 1926, 51; Bradshaw, 1931: 16). In both, safety precautions are relevant to a discussion of celebrity more generally as they are part of a number of small pieces of information that give a brief view of Leitzel's artificially constructed backstage world. These pieces of information give the illusion of making the private more public, contributing to the impression of intimacy in public.

In the 1926 *Liberty* article published during her lifetime, the application of rosin that was hidden in performance is instead disclosed. Here the mention of rosin exposes the present risk of slipping whilst giving comfort to audience members that safety precautions have been taken. This echoes the excitement derived from watching aerial

performance itself where you want to be excited by the possibility of death at the same time as being spared the trauma of witnessing it – the thrill is being there to see what might happen. More interesting for this discussion is the fact that the absence of the net as a safety precaution is mentioned. This allusion to the absence of a safety precaution (that in reality can be dangerous if fallen into incorrectly³⁵) heightens risk more extremely within the reader's imagination. But, it also serves to highlight Leitzel's skill and the confidence management have that an accident will not occur. Again we have the two possibilities of death and success coexisting in the reimagined live moment, but with skill more starkly highlighted – Leitzel and the Ringling management have confidence the net is not needed. In this case the risk exposed may be an actual one, but mention of safety precautions acts in two linked ways: it is a performance of the risk involved and a performance of the dominance of skill used to conquer it, whilst bringing the possible outcomes of success and failure to the fore to reinvigorate the feelings of aerial excitement in the imagination.

What is also revealing is the way in which this journalist positions the role of risk within aerial performance. The journalist makes the perceptive observation: that 'To use one [a net] would ruin the spectacular quality of her act' (Queed, 1926: 51). Risk is central to the spectacle of Leitzel's act and choosing to work without a net is therefore an aesthetic choice that is made at the cost of apparent safety. Risk is part of the aesthetics of aerial performance and by highlighting the unseen risk for readers the journalist is helping audience members better appreciate the aesthetics of the act and of the form – it helps you as the uninitiated audience member consider Leitzel's body as taking real risks for your enjoyment.

Woven into four out of the five feature articles are descriptions that highlight Leitzel's vulnerability in visceral terms fitting of the word *stigmata* – a manifestation frequently associated with female martyrs. Her act and its effects on her body are described in stark terms that are more explicit than those used to describe the male flyer Alfredo Codona: the planche rope 'cuff press[es] into soft white flesh' and she is left 'panting breathless but still game' (Fellows, 1923: 12 & 13); she has 'Aching muscles, [and] straining heart pounding wildly', 'red welts on ...back and arms' from rosin rope burns (Bradshaw,

³⁵ One of the first things taught on flying trapeze is to fall safely into the net on your back. If you fall feet first you risk the tautness of the net acting like a trampoline, catapulting you out of the net.

1931: 17); ‘calloused spots on her palm[s] due ...to the nature of her work’ (Williams, 1923: 92); she suffered ‘rope burns’, ‘raw...hands’ and ‘In the center of one palm ...a blood blister had broken, while, under the calluses at each finger tip [*sic*], huge water blisters rose’ (Queed, 1926: 51). In later years memoir writers describe an open wound created by the friction between the planche rope cuff and her skin (Kline, 2008: 244; Bradna and Spence, 1953: 150; Manning-Sanders, 1952: 242; Taylor, 1956: 218–9). Leitzel is described as suffering for her audience whilst she profits from it. Her physical stigmata represent her body as physically vulnerable, like her audiences’ bodies. Yet, her body is also strong enough to bear it, making her a martyr for their entertainment – activating the martyr’s saintly allure. Her *stigmata* as well as demonstrating her body as predominantly vulnerable and mortal, demonstrates her *charismata* strength and skill in the same way as risk highlights skill.

This representation of Leitzel as suffering for her audience is one that also confirms her artistry. In highlighting how she suffers, the press and memoir writers are drawing on the enduring image of the suffering artist. Drawing attention to her wounds reconfigures Leitzel as more than just a popular performer who gained her celebrity status from a stunt. Instead she is an elevated artist who demonstrated her artistry in the element of her act that did not involve the stunt: the roman rings section. Reference to the wounds she sustained from her practice therefore frames her as both artist and as a martyr performing for her audience.



Figure 13: 'Dainty Miss Leitzel' (1925) Ringling Bros & Barnum & Bailey, Collection of the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Tibbals Collection, ht2001468. Trademarks for *Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey*® and *The Greatest Show On Earth*® used with permission of *Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey*® and Feld Entertainment, Inc.

The reading of Leitzel as a martyr for her audience is one that is visible in posters such as Figure 13 (Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus, 1925a). This poster and its portrait version, is one of the key images of Lillian Leitzel that was pasted across rural and urban locations during numerous Ringling-Barnum seasons throughout the 1920s. The depiction of three images of the performer rather than the normal maximum of two is unusual, making it one of the most complex circus poster from this era I have seen. Leitzel's head is haloed in white by a feather fan, whose colour contrasts strongly against the dark blue circus drapes – the haloed head hinting at Orthodox religious iconography of saints. This image of Leitzel in repose is positioned as the largest central focal point and is flanked by images of her in performance – it is unsurprising that the rightmost image seen through the circus flap depicts the planche turns that made her famous. The composition of the image to present at its focus her glamorous body in repose, instantly recognisable due to her iconic costume, demonstrates an interest in Leitzel's private self. Here the 'real', 'private' Leitzel is caught outside the moment of performance. This focal image combines a visual depiction of intimacy in public with an icon performing for her audience. In both images of Leitzel in performance there exists a representation of her

audience. These audience members surround the multiple stages and rings, stretching as far as the eye can see, in the tens of thousands. Her body is dangling above their heads precisely for these excited audience members. The poster glorifies her body in performance precisely because it puts itself at risk for audience excitement.

There is a particular twist on risk in Leitzel's iconic image that has implications for experiencing subsequent aerialists because she did fall and later die as a result of equipment failure ('Circus Fall Fatal', 1931; Clemings, 1931: 1 & 2). This fall performed risk for other aerialists because it proves that the danger of death is real. Even those achieved celebrities renowned for skill can be killed by faulty equipment. Those watching aerialists such as Leers in the year following Leitzel's death would have felt the present possibility of failure more strongly. The performance of risk only functions to thrill if the possibility of death, held at a distance by skill, is felt as probable – that way death and weightless success can coexist in the same moment.

However, there are other implications to Leitzel's death that relate to aerial celebrity. Leers, who has been largely forgotten, died quietly in Germany after having left the circus industry. Many of the names remembered clearly by circus fans and historians today were those who died either in performance like Leitzel, or notoriously like Alfredo and Vera Bruce Codona as the result of a murder suicide. These are the characters whose lives are continuously retold. Inevitably the deaths of Leitzel and Alfredo and Vera are nearly always entwined. The death and murder suicide is attributed to Alfredo's failure to recover from Leitzel's death (his second wife), despite his third marriage to Vera. The story of Leitzel and the Codonas is often presented alongside other well-worn tragic and romantic stories of heightened emotions. These include the unrequited love, rivalry and deaths of Wilhelm and Dolf of the Three Sylvians: two brothers in love with their partner Helena who favoured neither, which led one brother to start drinking and slip in performance and the other to commit suicide after failing to catch him (Manning-Sanders, 1952: 245–6; Croft-Cooke and Meadmore, 1946: 68). Inevitably the language is melodramatic and the narratives focus on lives lived extremely – lives lived at risk. Therefore, to make your way into the annals of aerial circus celebrity most smoothly, one must have died a tragic and romantic death that echoes the excitement of an aerial act.

Here the issue of vulnerability, notoriety and its relationship to celebrity raises its head. Returning to Roach's concept of public intimacy, too much vulnerability risks the icon becoming too accessible and thereby tipping into its antithesis of unfavourable public recognition. 'Notoriety inexorably shadows celebrity, as obloquy and abjection with predatory patience for the light of glamour to fail' (2007: 91). Surely death in public is the most extreme vulnerability that makes the celebrity notorious? However, it is not as simple as stating that notoriety obliterates the celebrity image; instead it can compound it if it is considered as a 'sub-branch of celebrity' (Rojek, 2001: 10). If the celebrity image is strong enough, its after-image can not only withstand the shock of a notorious death; it can build upon it. Notoriety has the ability to add to celebrity, ensuring that the individual is remembered. Even better if the death reinforces romantic tropes associated with the performance form, such as those of an aerialist who lives and loves extremely whilst performing at the very limits of life: death.

Leitzel's celebrity image relied on a complex representation of risk and skill, both in performance and in media that was gendered to emphasise risk. The performance of risk highlighted skill that otherwise might have been hidden by her movements' apparent weightlessness, easiness and the enjoyment she displayed. Newspaper coverage emphasised the risk she put her body under to highlight skill, managing even to reframe weightlessness with its connotations of ease, as a demonstration of skill. In doing so, it performed risk and skill whilst pointing to the private backstage life of the star. Coverage also highlights how central the performance of risk is to aerial performance, revealing it to be an aesthetic of the art form that is integral to the spectacle. However, skill itself is also directly approached in coverage rather than being highlighted as an inverse to risk. In all major feature articles Leitzel's skill emerges strongly as a theme in a manner that could risk overpowering her approachability. In the physical culture articles that emphasise it most strongly, the reader is invited to try difficult actions Leitzel can perform. In these cases, the reader is invited to create an imaginative connection between their body and Leitzel's that pulls them closer through empathy whilst accentuating the distance when they encounter the difficulty in performing those actions. This distance is reduced when readers hear how Leitzel's body is actually just like theirs because it bleeds, burns and aches. Her performance creates marks upon her body that hold a similar position to the martyr's stigmata and situate her as a suffering artist rather than stunting performer. The concept of stigmata as a very real wound endured in memoir writers'

accounts, and highlights how vulnerability needed to be emphasised strongly in relationship to skill if you were a female star. It shows how interrelated the concept of risk and vulnerability is to strength in Leitzel's aerial celebrity: to endure stigmata and survive one has to have charisma, to demonstrate one's body as pleurably risky one has to be understood to have the requisite skill. In dying on aerial equipment Leitzel performed risk for other aerialists whilst cementing her celebrity status through a romantic strain of aerial notoriety; but in life Leitzel understood the key to her stardom was to perform skilful vulnerability for the audience.

Conclusion: Skilful Vulnerability

Reconfiguring Roach's public intimacy as skilful vulnerability demonstrates how allure was constructed within aerial celebrity in the 1920s and early 1930s and could be fruitfully applied to analyse other popular entertainments that utilise skill and risk. The examples of Leers and Leitzel demonstrate the correct balancing of vulnerability and skill was skewed further towards vulnerability in female stars: owning a female body increased the perception of your body at risk and publicity emphasised this attribute more extremely in coverage of female stars. Shifting perceptions of the female body at risk may be one contributory factor in why risk is currently downplayed in contemporary circus. Luisita Leers was at least as skilled a performer as Leitzel – in fact my suspicion is she displayed a higher level of virtuosity – but the fact her act emphasised skill without a high enough proportion of performed risk to balance it is one of the reasons she is not remembered as a circus celebrity by circus fans. Leitzel's showmanship relied on her astute ability to know exactly how to present her body as skilfully vulnerable in light of her gender. However, it also points to one explanation why endurance activities were performed by female stars, that moves beyond an act that was easy for impresarios to market. If endurance acts intrinsically suggest a higher level of risk, then the increased vulnerability they create conforms to the gendering of risk in aerial celebrity. However, endurance also suggests strength and competitiveness, requiring a higher emphasis on vulnerability in publicity to make it acceptable. This paradox is another contributing factor as to how 1920s and early 1930s female aerialists helped absorb strength into some feminine ideals: the higher level of vulnerability felt by a female body at risk made strength appear more acceptable.

The relationship between risk and skill is complicated. Analysing Leers and Leitzel has revealed the interconnectedness of the two concepts and their significance in

understanding how aerial performance is experienced. The performance of actual skill is required to perform aerial movements as easy through their appearance of weightlessness. However, for audiences that do not have aerial understanding the apparent easiness, exacerbated by the convention of performing aerial action as pain-free, can diminish skill. It is here the showman needs to astutely employ her skills in audience manipulation because the performance of skill can suggest risk, and the performance of risk can highlight skill – the true locations of both are obscured. Every movement performed on aerial equipment includes within it a choice of how to frame skill or vulnerability for effect. This choice of how risk and skill are presented is so central to aerial performance that it is an aesthetic of the art form. It is this balanced relationship of skilful vulnerability in aerial action that creates the frisson of excitement that thrills, because it rehearses through the kinaesthetic system the credible possibility of falling and flying in the very same moment. But as the precise performance of risk and skill required to generate this excitement is and was gendered, the next chapter examines how the performance of femininity worked within the equation of celebrity and showmanship.

4. Performing & Negotiating Muscular Femininity: Aerial Celebrity & the Modern Girl

In the 1920s and early 1930s aerial celebrity and showmanship was gendered. Not only was the performance of risk and skill influenced by whether the performer was a woman, female aerialists were also performing their femininity to appeal to mass audiences. The allure of aerial celebrity relied on the glamour implicit in aerial action and the public intimacy generated by performing skilful vulnerability, but it was also about expert performances of gender. Celebrity is not just about the allure generated by the act but is also a reflection of society. In this chapter I examine how female aerialists represented their femininity and how this related to a concern in 1920s society that centred on women and the apparent blurring of the boundaries between sexes. This resulted from the impact of the First World War that led to higher proportions of women in society and changing attitudes to the family. Women were more visible and many of the concerns of conservative male society being overwhelmed by women centred on the international ‘flapper’ or ‘modern girl’ stereotype. By comparing this ideal of femininity to Luisita Leers, Lillian Leitzel and the Flying Codonas, I argue that both young women and female aerialists were negotiating gender in the interwar period.³⁶ It is this complex gender negotiation that contributed to their allure at a cultural and societal level.

Circus stars were popular performers but to be a celebrity they had to be recognisable as a household name. The performer must create enough allure or charisma to establish a dynamic relationship with the public that inspires the audience member to imaginatively identify with the star (Dyer, 1979: 35; 1987: ix). Richard Dyer highlights this relationship between an audience and the star image as a gap in scholarship, describing how the audience has the power to sabotage an image to create subversive counter-culture readings (1987: 4–5). In considering twentieth-century stars or celebrities as embodying ‘charisma’, he draws upon Max Weber’s use of the term in the field of political theory. Dyer removes the notion of political power from Weber’s charisma, emphasising instead a ‘personality’ that sets itself apart from the ordinary masses – a personality endowed with ‘supernatural, superhuman or at least superficially exceptional qualities’ (Weber in

³⁶ It should be noted that Barquette as a female impersonating aerial star also embodied concerns regarding gender blurring, but that as a male-born artist does not fall within the scope of this thesis.

Dyer, 1979: 35). In referencing SN Eisenstadt's suggestion that charisma is particularly effective when society is unstable and defining the twentieth-century as characterised by instability, Dyer proposes we need to think: 'in terms of relationships... between stars and specific instabilities, ambiguities and contradictions in the culture (which are reproduced in the actual practice of making films [or circuses], and film [or circus] stars)' (1991: 58; 1979: 35).

This is because the celebrity is an individual who navigates the private and the public: either somehow managing to appear to be their private and authentic selves effortlessly in public, or by mastering their public performance of themselves with perfectly judged 'poise and correctness' (Dyer, 1987: 12). The audience's fascination comes from how the star articulates this relationship between private self and wider society, successfully embodying a problem at the heart of being human for an audience member who is alive in a particular cultural and historical moment (Dyer, 1987: 15). For Dyer, a celebrity's charisma is created by instabilities in the culture it is created from, embodying particular concerns that the individual audience member is fascinated by because they articulate an issue or problem they are also living through. In analysing how this private-in-public persona works within a celebrity image, Dyer sets up a series of oppositions that represent the divisions of private and public. Solo female aerialists embody a number of the private characteristics that I will highlight to differing degrees in the following discussion. These include the 'individual', 'physical', the 'natural' and 'sexual intercourse', whilst it has already been demonstrated that aerialists inhabited a strange position between the private 'country' and public 'city' (1987: 10).

When thinking about female aerialists in the 1920s, this concern with instabilities and contradictions in culture is particularly useful. However, it also highlights that in removing the political context from Weber's definition of charisma a different set of political relations exist. If a celebrity embodies a societal concern through the contradictions they portray, then the emphasis they place within their representation will be a political statement on the problem. In Dyer's terms, the focus of this chapter will be on the sexual, focusing not on intercourse but instead on the performance of gender to negotiate current societal concerns. Female aerialists demonstrated the traditionally gendered attributes of feminine grace and masculine strength at a historical moment when the boundaries of gender appeared to be blurred or under attack. Circus publicity

and memoir writers represent and describe female aerialists as feminine despite their muscle – these artists blurred gender through their feminine muscularity. They were not the first women to perform gracefully feminine acts with muscular female bodies on aerial equipment, but their bodies gained special cultural significance because of what was happening in wider society and the power of circus marketing in the 1920s. It is not a coincidence that at the same time as female aerialists were at the height of their popularity that the youthful modern girl was a controversial figure in the popular imagination. The modern girl challenged the passive middle-class ideal of femininity of older more conservative generations through her modern, dynamic, international, and cross-class expression of femininity. In negotiating a different expression of femininity for themselves, modern girls and female aerialists used their bodies to challenge and reconfigure dramatically what it meant to be a woman in the 1920s.

For this reason, I first outline the defining characteristics of the modern girl in this chapter, noting the global and controversial nature of this stereotype of femininity. Comparing this figure to the female aerialist historicises how this type of popular performer embodied specific instabilities in the 1920s concerned with femininity and gender boundaries. Luisita Leers' and Lillian Leitzel's acts are analysed to demonstrate how they performed their femininity in a complex manner, both demonstrating activities that conformed to older and 'modern' expressions of femininity. Luisita Leers was a rising star whose act required considerable strength and was defined by controlled grace and flexibility, whilst Lillian Leitzel was the highest profile circus celebrity of the period who framed her act as feminine despite finishing her act with a spectacular endurance feat of strength. Both examinations ground solo female aerialists' popularity on the fact they embodied and negotiated the concern regarding blurred gender boundaries in wider society. However, comparing Leers to Leitzel also indicates one reason why Leers did not achieve the celebrity status of Leitzel. Both Leitzel's act and newspaper coverage demonstrate that Leitzel was able to depict her femininity as diverse enough to appear as separate identities within the one star. Leitzel's ambiguous performance of her femininities allowed her to appeal to diverse audiences even if more modern representations tended to dominate. Although there is no evidence for how audiences felt about the societal concern of gender blurring, the false dichotomies set up in newspaper coverage indicate it was a concern circus impresarios sought to address. The last act I examine is the Flying Codonas flying trapeze troupe which included women as

an ornamental feminine element and, in doing so, reinstated gender hierarchies. The division of labour within this act demonstrates that the concern with gender blurring was not restricted to the performance of soloists but extended into male dominated troupes where a woman's presence was a requirement for troupe success.

The Modern Girl & Gender Blurring

Perhaps one of the reasons why the flapper or modern girl is such an evocative stereotype of femininity even now, is because she claimed a different femininity for herself globally and across class boundaries (Søland, 2000: 3 & 17; Barlow *et al.*, 2005; Kent, 2009: 39–40). The stereotype is most strongly associated with the 1920s, existing as an icon for the period that emerged most clearly from 1919 and did not last beyond the decade, despite having roots in the generation who came of age from around 1910 (Søland, 2000: 3; Melman, 1988: 3). These women had different names in different national contexts but were globally known as the 'modern girl'.³⁷ The use of the word 'girl' separates them from the politically motivated 'New Woman' of the Victorian period and stresses youthful exuberance as a defining characteristic of the stereotype.

In America and England, the term 'flapper' was used to describe these modern young women, indicating strong cultural similarities within these transatlantic contexts and the contentious position these young women held in society. Kingsley Kent designates 'flapper' a derisive term whose origins Billie Melman usefully explores in detail (Kent, 2009: 39; Melman, 1988: 27–30). Even if identification with this modern ideal was widespread among young women, it was problematic for conservative members of society. Melman explains that by the 1920s 'the new usage still retained many of the old connotations of the word ... [and] implied childishness, precocious sexuality and, more often than not, inanity, fickleness and inconsistency' (1988: 29). According to the misogynistic *Punch* in the late 1920s, the term 'flapper' generally referred to disenfranchised young women who were aged between twenty-one and thirty in England, and was used in the Rothermere press' campaign against women's enfranchisement on equal terms between 1927 and 1928 (Melman, 1988: 29 & 30). Before even beginning to explore the characteristics of this new breed of young women, the issues associated with terms used to describe them demonstrates their controversial

³⁷ The range of titles indicate the global reach of this stereotype of femininity: *garçonnes*, *moga*, *modeng* *xiaojie*, *schoolgirls*, *kallege ladki*, *vamps* and *neue Frauen* (Barlow *et al.*, 2005: 245).

nature within society. To avoid the negative associations with the term ‘flapper’ and due to the pervasive global nature of the phenomenon and the international nature of the female aerialists I relate to it, I make the deliberate choice to use the term ‘modern girl’ throughout this thesis.

Women gained the vote on unequal terms in England in 1919, remaining disenfranchised until 1928, whilst in the USA they gained the vote in 1920. For some scholars of British history the First World War limited the gains made by feminists as an emphasis on domesticity and motherhood took hold within society after the war (Pugh, 1992: 312; Kent, 1993: 141). More recent scholarship has pushed against these readings that do not privilege the active role women took in performing self-identities that challenged conservative ideas of what a woman should be and do. Angela Latham instead describes how ‘self-presentation’ provided a battle site for emancipated women who were still not considered equal participants in society (2000: 9 & 156). Barlow *et al* have articulated the link more strongly, observing that the modern girl was less often identified with direct political or legislative change, but instead with ‘ostentatiously refashioning and refining her body’ (2005: 249). This emphasis on the body as a site of self-presentation or self-definition demonstrates two ways in which the modern girl can be defined as ‘modern’: the first is the embracing of commodity culture associated with modernity and the cosmopolitan city through following fashion; and the second is the claiming of their bodies as a site through which to demonstrate their femininity as breaking with the passive and domestic femininity of earlier generations.

This body ownership created a physical appearance that included: a slim, youthful, elongated athletic body that no longer emphasised hips and breasts, and short bobbed hair, creating what many contemporaries considered to be androgynous boyish young women (Barlow *et al*, 2005: 248; Kent, 2009: 39). This was combined with an assertive, flirtatious femininity whose emphasis was on having fun rather than marriage and procreation (Søland, 2000: 15 & 16; Barlow *et al*, 2005: 256). There is also something aspirational about the modern girl that ties her to commodity culture through youthful fun and confirmation to an idealised athletic body type. Not only is this modern girl consuming fashions that promise youth, her enjoyment of her own active bodily identity is associated with leisured independence or the appearance of it (Barlow *et al*, 2005: 260; Latham, 2000: 44). Women’s choice to use their newly achieved expendable income to

engage in this aspirational commodity culture across class and global boundaries is what sets them apart from the earlier fashion conscious young 'girl's' of the 19th century.

Film stars such as Clara Bow and Louise Brooks epitomise the modern girl. What is interesting about these film stars is the fun, activity and agency they embody. These women speed through narratives that 'concern the flapper's pursuit of modern life – independent from parental and other authoritarian control – and a modern romance in which her defiant actions, unruly behavior, and daring dress are either obstacles or catalysts, or both' (Landay, 2002: 224). These women are represented as having a role in defining their own futures and often come from working class urban professions such as shop girls. Wearing the latest fashions, they are frequently shot laughing and enjoying themselves through energetic activities such as dancing. The active personas they present take advantage of one of the silent film star's biggest assets, the eyes, to challenge any simple designation of the film star as objectified. Lori Landay argues their eyes demonstrate the ludic potential of comedy to disrupt objectification and, in Bow's case, a powerful 'desiring female gaze that is so active we can see it reach across the frame' (2002: 240). Not every woman would be prepared to risk the danger in such an uninhibited expression of the active modern girl as demonstrated by film stars, but many of their attributes were claimed by ordinary young women who wished to be modern.

Although the modern girl was fashionable, her femininity was problematic for the older generation who saw her as blurring gender boundaries. In countries that had lost significant numbers of men during the First World War this concern is often ascribed to society being overwhelmed by the disproportionate numbers of these assertive new women. This was particularly the case in England when enfranchisement on equal terms was proposed and where the disparity between the sexes led to over 1,920,000 women being labelled as 'superfluous' (Kent, 2009: 153; Melman, 1988: 5 & 19; Pugh, 1992: 77). However, Søland's Danish study highlights that the concern with the modern girl blurring gender boundaries was more than just about the effect of the war on the numbers of women in society (2000). A number of material factors can be identified that relate to how society and the family were changing. The most important of these changes for this analysis was how modern girls represented themselves and their connection to commodity culture (Melman, 1988: 5; Søland, 2000). In America this representation and

the fashion for clothing that exposed more female flesh than had been previously visible, was even linked to the declining moral standards of the nation (Latham, 2000: 54).

There are contradictions in the way in which fashions were attacked for linking female exposure to sexual immorality and in the concern about apparent mannishness. Short, bobbed haircuts were identified as masculine or mannish but modern girls allayed these claims by reframing such fashions as *different* expressions of femininity. In the case of short hair, this was reframed as feminine by adopting short wavy hairstyles that distanced themselves from male hair in style (Søland, 2000: 40). However, looking back at the image of the modern girl I am not struck by her mannishness but instead by her femininity. Perhaps this was the success of the modern girl that she changed modern perceptions of what femininity is and therefore what it means to be a woman. As I have already argued in Chapter 2, the presence of masculine elements within female representation can push femininity into sharp relief, emphasising female sexuality rather than sexlessness or asexuality. I am not alone in feeling the contradiction in the image of the modern girl. Melman considers it to be apparent at the time, stating that ‘there co-existed diverse and contradictory notions on the female as androgyne, a figure characterised as sexless but libidinous; infantile but precocious; self-sufficient but demographically, economically and socially superfluous’ (1988: 1) If, as Dyer asserts, celebrity is connected to instabilities, ambiguities or contradictions in culture, then the modern girl demonstrates that gender could be classed as an ambiguity at the heart of 1920s culture.

The Modern Girl & the Female Aerialist

The modern girl existed as a cultural image that embodied concerns related to gender blurring in society, at a time when the female aerialist blurred gender to popular acclaim through her demonstrations of grace and strength. Although her costume does not bear immediate comparison to the clothes of the modern girl there are strong similarities in their representations. Latham has noted the modern girl did not just appear costumed in fashionable clothing, she also ‘comprised a pose, a posturing, a contrived demeanor – in short a performance’ (2000: 20). Both aerialists and modern girls used their bodies to perform their femininity. It should be noted before engaging fully in any comparison that the celebrity of the female aerialist was not a new phenomenon. These artists had attained celebrity status in circuses and music halls on both sides of the Atlantic from the late 1860s (Tait, 2005: 16). The 1920s instead represent the period when individual

performers were capable of reflecting this new expression of modern femininity whilst reaching the largest global audiences. If we consider the wider associations that soloists evoke, themes emerge strongly that relate her to the stereotype of the modern girl.

The modern girl was an independent figure associated with the cosmopolitan city and solo female aerialists exemplified these characteristics: a soloist appeared in the ring on her own, profiting from her own act as an independent working woman. Not only that, but she was a cosmopolitan performer who appeared in major cities across the globe – in circus venues and in American vaudeville and European variety venues. Even when she appeared in America in the largest tenting circuses, her more rural performances were undertaken in a temporary space that was described as a ‘City of Canvas’ in promotional materials, due to the thousands who would sit together under the big top (Barnum & Bailey Circus, 1903). The American circus began its season with long runs in cities like New York, and performers carried many of these urban associations into more rural environments. The female aerialist represented a successful independent cosmopolitan working woman at home with negotiating busy city or city-like environments.

More importantly though, the very site the modern girl refashioned to produce her identity was the one where the aerialist demonstrated gender blurring. The body of the aerialist is one that Peta Tait has described as where ‘double gendering’ occurs (2005: 31). Aerial performance depends upon strength, creating bodies whose muscles are visibly refashioned through practice, whilst grace is required to facilitate these feats of strength. Aerial movements therefore require both traditionally masculine strength and feminine grace in combination. Tricks are made easier through the use of good technique that requires tensed, elongated muscles and takes advantage of the swing or momentum created by movement. This gives an impression of weightlessness when completing demonstrations of strength and muscular control. These women were demonstrating publicly that they had mastery and control over their own bodies. The repertoire of movements they performed were frequently described as unique to each performer and, as such, the ownership of the act was linked to their own individual active female bodies. Before accounting for any kind of performance style, the body of the aerialist can be seen as the site of gender blurring.

The modern girl challenged traditional gender conventions and because of this was not universally acceptable. Therefore, specific performers had to choose how to frame their own muscular femininity – much in the same way that modern girls gained acceptance through reframing their look as a different expression of femininity. This leads me to propose that rather than ‘double gendering’ occurring, female aerialists were doing something more complex – they were instead negotiating gender and were part of a reframing of femininity that took place in the 1920s. This negotiation required both traditional and modern expressions of femininity to be mixed within each act, providing readings that were predominantly modern, but still had the potential to appeal to conservative audience members. This strategy enabled radical acts such as presenting the muscular female body as desirable to appear within the mainstream. Key to the female aerialists’ success in this period was that they were negotiating the very gender concerns that were at the heart of society.

Luisita Leers: a Rising Star & Gender Negotiator

Luisita Leers was a rising star of Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey from 1928 to 1933. The reproduction of her image within souvenir programmes produced by the Ringling-Barnum circus suggests she was being groomed for stardom, but that widespread celebrity status was never achieved. There are few sources left that describe Leers’ act and her career, which was affected by the Depression and was brought to an end by the Second World War, making it difficult to reconstruct. Her solo static trapeze act relied on her youthfulness, which is frequently highlighted in press and publicity. The range of movements depicted in photographs and described in correspondence indicate that her act was characterised by controlled movement. Leers’ performance was an act of gender blurring because she appealed to both older and more modern expressions of femininity whilst demonstrating traditionally gendered masculine strength. However, the fact her act relied more visibly on strength provides a possible reason why she is not remembered as a circus celebrity.

Leers’ act was characterised by a controlled and graceful femininity that relied more strongly on precision, technique, flexibility and strength. Her high level of virtuosity has already been demonstrated through Dexter Fellows’ remark that considered Leers a greater aerialist than Leitzel (see p133). But, it is also evident in photographs that depict her act and show her performing challenging positions that rely on strength and good technique, such as a single-arm planche or a neck-hang with side-splits (Atwell, 1931a;

1931c; 1931b; 1931c; 1931c; n.d.; n.d.; Scala, n.d.). The comparison to Leitzel designated Leers as one of the most skilled aerialists working internationally, but the impression created through photographs is of a cleaner demonstration of technique and a controlled performance of femininity.

The photographs uncovered in the archives consulted show her performing a number of static positions on static trapeze. These include: shoulder and back balances, side-splits hanging from the trapeze by one leg (or hock), a neck-hang with side-splits, and one-arm planches (a strength move where the body works against gravity to hang by one arm: the holding arm twisted up a back that curves against it, legs pointed together below and the free arm outstretched upwards). Each of these positions requires high levels of precision to achieve the moment of balance and the strength to maintain the body's position despite the pull of gravity. When the body achieves the shape or balance point, correct form is held for a few seconds so that the audience can appreciate the feat. The neck-hang with side-splits was a particularly virtuosic move, (see p135 for Leers' description of the difficulty). Not only is there a very small contact point between the neck and straight trapeze bar, but once the neck-hang balance has been achieved, the leg's movement into splits alters the centre of gravity - this required Leers to compensate for this muscular movement and change in weight distribution. This was most likely a signature move due to its inclusion in a collage of publicity images within the Ringling-Barnum souvenir programme (Figure 14), and its mention by Leers in personal correspondence and in a brief circus fanzine article reflecting on her career (Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus, 1931b; Leers 1933: 2; 'Luisita Leers - Seventeen', 1953: 13). What emerges from an analysis of these positions and Fellows' appreciation of Leers' virtuosity is an act that relied on Leers' bodily control with its associations with modern femininity, and an indication of a fairly consistently paced performance that shifted between pauses for audience appreciation.



Figure 14: Luisita Leers feature images (1931) Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Combined Show, *The Greatest Show on Earth Magazine and Daily Review* ('road' /tenting version), CWM Mss 3, Circus World Museum, Baraboo, WI

Leers' controlled technique and repertoire of positions also relied on flexibility, an attribute that evoked sexual connotations. In particular, Leers' side-splits, either performed hanging from the bar by one leg (or hock) or whilst performing her signature neck-hang, focused attention to the crotch – especially when the final position was held to ensure audience appreciation of the feat. In 1927 in Havana a poster depicting her in one of her side-split positions drew enough sexual interest for the management to paste a printed 'Hoy' over the groin area to protect her from insinuations. The biography writer, Ron Morris suggests this was due to different 'sexual mores' being present in Havana than America or Europe (1976: 87). Tait proposes some of the attention may have been generated because there was not a convention for full length publicity photography in Cuba, or it might be because 'an image of female muscularity was threatening, and a sexualised response was one way that the gender hierarchy could be restored' (2005: 82). I do not tie Leers' muscularity to her potential to be sexualised, but instead consider her flexibility to be key to this. One newspaper report describes her flexibility in sensual

terms, considering how she ‘wriggled, writhed, contorted and did all manner of things whilst the muscles rippled under her smooth, white skin’ (‘Girl Trapeze Star’, 1929). Flexibility is highly prized by aerialists because it enables a performer to shape their body around equipment in a wider variety of ways, increasing their repertoire and allowing them to create more precise shapes with their body. However, flexibility cannot escape its associations with sex.

In Leers’ case, her precision presented her in control of her active body in the same way as the modern girl, but her pauses for appreciation in poses that relied on flexibility also displayed her as strangely passive. Although there is always potential for a moving body to be sexualised, some performances of aerial acts seem strangely distanced from sex. Although the performer’s persona and the way in which they engage with their audience are responsible for sexualisation, pace and pauses are also significant. The dispute between Florenz Ziegfeld and Lee Shubert in 1926 highlights the way in which sexual associations were considered differently in movement and static displays. For Ziegfeld a tableau could be defended on artistic merit whereas movement was considered sexually provocative (Latham, 2000: 119 & 148). The tableau’s static movement carried within it associations with classical statuary that made display appear more acceptable. I consider the pauses for appreciation Leers included to be less sexually suggestive, because once seen as a static moment the movement lost some of its sexually provocative associations and instead alluded to art – these pauses emphasising passivity rather than agency. By extension, an act built on ‘classical’ pauses would have evoked more traditional expressions of femininity.

Even when Leers performed her spectacular endurance feat finale, it was characterised by control rather than Leitzel’s violent dynamic movement. Leers’ feat comprised 100 muscle grinds or elbow rolls performed with ‘open hands’ (‘Luisita Leers - Seventeen’, 1953: 13). There are two methods of performing an elbow roll, both of which use the mid-back area as a pivot point to revolve the body around the bar. The same souvenir programme images (Figure 14) show what was either Leers’ finishing or starting pose bottom left. The positioning of her elbows in a braced position against the bar suggest to me that she performed her elbow roll with hands on the bar rather than resting flat against the waist. From this position with legs pointing down and chest arched over the bar, Leers would have pushed her chest back, brought her legs up slightly to create a v-

shape with her body. This v-shape allowed her to adjust the gravity acting on her body by moving the majority of her bodyweight to one side of the bar. Leers would then have tipped forward, curving her body to revolve under the bar by pushing her legs up and over, and tipping her pelvis to create the v-shape to push her body forward as it began to slow coming over the bar – tipping to create momentum forward and curving to carry her over: 100 times. This version of the elbow roll requires more strength from the performer – something Leers’ visible muscularity indicates she had plenty of – but carries the benefit of less bruising to the arms because the hands control the movement of a trapeze bar that can otherwise cause damage as it travels along the bicep during each revolution. In correspondence, Leers refers to this movement as a ‘muscle grind’ (1933: 2), but rather than describing the bicep muscle being ground, it is more likely that her description refers to the muscles of the lower back that are braced against the bar as the body revolves over it. Leers’ elbow rolls were not a performance of reckless abandon but were instead clean, controlled and graceful. To the uninitiated this endurance feat would have given the appearance of movements being weightless or easier than they actually were.

Although Leers’ entire act relied on grace coming from precision, feminine extended limbs and exhibitions of sexualised flexibility, much of what she presented required considerable muscular strength that would have been evident to the audience. This includes a one-armed climb or descent from her trapeze with feet pointed and legs crossed at ninety-degrees to her body (Atwell, 1931c). This strength is what is responsible for Leers’ extraordinarily muscular body (see Figure 14 top right image) that went far beyond the type of muscle athletic modern girls would have aspired to. This did confuse one reporter who appears unsure of whether to read her muscle as feminine within the non-circus YMCA space he interviewed her in: ‘It must not be inferred that Luisita is not strictly feminine, when she relaxes her muscles. She’s pretty, has dark bobbed hair and wears little earrings even when performing’ (‘Girl Trapeze Star’, 1929). Yet Leers is shown in Figure 14 and earlier publicity images, widely beaming and enjoying her unconventional body in the same way as the modern girl was expected to enjoy her athletic body (Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus, 1931b; 1929b). Inside the performance space Leers’ visibly strong female body was glorified and glamorised for what it could achieve despite its unconventional appearance.

What is interesting about Leers' appearance is that it mixes expressions of femininity in its shape, placement and costuming. She may have reflected the modern girl's enjoyment of her body but her hourglass shape appeared classically feminine. Leers' muscular shoulders and full breasts emphasise her tiny waist and hips, particularly in a costume that clings so tightly to her toned body. She also entered the ring wearing a cloak and chaperoned by her father dressed as an attendant, nostalgically referencing older associations of femininity through aristocracy (Beal, n.d.: 5; Beal, n.d.). Depictions of Leers revelling in her body in publicity suggest the purpose of the cloak was not to hide her muscle mass and definition. However, Leers' costume also reflects the clean lines of the modern art deco movement, whilst her earrings and short wavy bobbed haircut are fashionable expressions of femininity used by modern girls. The presence of the medals pinned to her chest and mentioned in publicity material collapse these distinctions, inhabiting a dual space between modern and traditional femininity. They suggest ambition and competition – attributes that caused concern for young women who wished to succeed when exercising (see Chapter 5). Yet whilst existing primarily as a modern symbol of competitive success they are also a bodily adornment that resembles a brooch and evokes associations with older expressions of femininity.

This mixing of older and newer expressions of femininity is found in Leers' press articles and publicity, although the emphasis tends to be towards pushing the boundaries of modern femininity. Although little coverage devoted to Leers remains, a brief local press article that devotes most of its coverage to Leers emphasises those attributes that might appeal to conservative audience members: her 'school girl naïveté', 'shyness' and her 'artistry, embodying grace and beauty'. Accompanied by a photograph of Leers coming in or out of the elbow roll, it also highlights those attributes that align with and even push beyond the limits of modern femininity: her 'youth', 'lightning agility and endurance', and 'strength [that] is... phenomenal' ('Not Yet 20', 1931). Ringling-Barnum souvenir programmes push the acceptable boundaries of modern femininity, with Leers glorying in her unconventionally muscular body (see Figure 14 above and Figure 17 on p211). These feature images demonstrate Leers' popularity as she enjoys her unconventional body, but the facing advertising is also revealing. Adverts for the Nestle Lanoil hair curler endorsed by Leitzel appeared on the facing page to her feature image, demonstrating that placement of articles and feature images was deliberate (Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus, 1924). Leers' image was being used to publicise Vivaudou

cosmetics from 1928-1930, to inspire the 'vim' of Stirizol feminine hygiene wash from 1931-2 and to stress the long life that Lydia Pinkham's health products, particularly the newly developed vegetable compound (or vitamin) pills, could provide in 1933. All of these commodities are linked to modern femininity: a modern woman would use cosmetics in the pursuance of beauty, vim was an attribute of modern girls and hygiene lauded by physical culturists, whilst the new technology of vitamin pills promised health that in turn would support beauty and long life.

Leers' act and the press and publicity that surrounded her demonstrate how she performed older and newer expressions of femininity together. However, her repertoire and publicity demonstrate that her act encouraged more modern readings of femininity. Her act was one that appeared controlled, graceful and that pushed against the boundaries of acceptable femininity through showing extraordinary strength. There is little that describes Leers' performance style and which might indicate how sex appeared within her act. My reading of the poses depicted in photographs and described in correspondence suggest that flexibility sexualised her body but that the pauses included within the act added distance. Sadly, Leers' career was cut short by world events and resulting issues within the circus industry linked to the Depression. It would be interesting to know if Leers could have achieved the considerable stardom of Leitzel with a representation that aligned itself more clearly to modern femininity. However, one reason she is not remembered as a celebrity may be because her performance of femininity emphasised too strongly modern femininity and muscle. Although there were opportunities for conservative readings of her act, these were overshadowed by those that emphasised and pushed at the acceptable boundaries of modern femininity.

Lillian Leitzel: Sophisticated Celebrity Gender Negotiator

Lillian Leitzel was not only the preeminent circus celebrity in the biggest circus in the world, Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey, she also gained her success from an act that epitomised the female aerialists' gender negotiation through varied media. For Leitzel 'Strength is not a matter of sex, ... It is purely a matter of power. Just think about it for a moment. There is no law of nature that says strength is masculine and weakness is feminine' (in Williams, 1923: 92). Such a statement indicates that Leitzel was all too aware of how she performed and negotiated gender. She produced an act that used its structure, her performance style and costume to perform a complicated representation of her femininity. This complex performance drew on both conservative and modern

femininity, allowing her act to be read in a variety of ways that appealed to a range of modern audiences. Leitzel's success relied on a negotiation of gender that generally emphasised her modern appeal but that also included enough opportunities for conservative readings that it was acceptable mainstream entertainment. This clever negotiation of femininity enabled her to make an endurance feat, that would have been remarkable whether performed by either gender, the repertoire of women and presented her muscular female body as both in control of its desire and radically desirable. The following examination of these elements of her act is reconstructed from video and memoir and exposes how complicated and powerful her performance of gender was in the 1920s. I briefly consider newspaper coverage to historicise her celebrity and demonstrate how her public image with its complex representations of gender was integral to her celebrity charisma.

A Gender Blurring Act

The structure of Leitzel's act is striking when read against societal concerns of gender blurring: the first section broadly highlights her femininity and the second traditional masculinity through endurance. The first part saw Leitzel accompanied into the ring by a maid and footman, who assisted her by removing a cape or long transparent train from her shoulders, whilst she kicked off the high heeled mules that protected her performance shoes from the dirt of the ring (Bradna and Spence, 1953: 149; 'Home video of Leitzel', n.d.; Taylor, 1956: 221). Flicking the rope, she struck poses with pointed toes and swayed seductively before ascending her rope and taking her place on her roman rings ('Home video of Leitzel', n.d.). Here she used momentum to move dynamically between static poses or to spin on individual rings that were attached to swivels (DeBaugh, n.d.).

The first section of her act was a show of femininity and is particularly interesting because it points to both older forms of femininity and the modern expression. In appearing chaperoned in the ring she glamorously appealed to older forms, whilst her choice to wear high heels was a reference to current fashions. When she spun beneath her roman rings she gracefully struck poses that appeared balletic, pirouetting beneath her rings with pointed toes (Atwell, 1928b). Yet at the same time as she appeared gracefully on her rings she evoked a more assertively sexual personality that was emphasised more strongly towards the end of her career. The safety precaution of applying rosin described in the previous chapter was hidden towards the beginning of

her career through the use of a powder-puff and towards the end in seductive actions as she flicked the rope before ascending it – indicating that Leitzel adapted her performance of femininity as changes in acceptable female behaviour occurred. In earlier years the rosin was hidden by an object associated with beautifying the body and latterly within what one memoir writer describes in sexually suggestive terms as ‘excited writhings’ (Cooper, 1931: 148). Leitzel’s assertive persona was established from the start of her act and is highlighted by another memoir writer who describes how she played the diva as she blew kisses from the rope before taking her place on the rings (O’Brien, 1959: 124). At the conclusion of this section of her act, she would descend again, making a display of the fact she came to earth on balletic pointed toes (DeBaugh, n.d.; ‘Home video of Leitzel’, n.d.).

The second half of the act began with Leitzel being pulled to the roof on her planche rope. First, Leitzel would swing back and forth: scissoring, cutting and kicking her feet up both for effect and to achieve the momentum with which to revolve her body around her wrist (Paulinetti, 1923: 41; ‘Home video of Leitzel’, n.d.). Even in this section of her act that is conventionally read as masculine in demonstrating endurance, there are readings that can be interpreted as reflecting both older and modern expressions of femininity. As she is pulled to the roof of the tent with feet pointed together, rather than climbs, Leitzel frames her body as weightless and therefore graceful. In the same way as being hoisted to the top of the roof drew reference to weightlessness, the way in which the planche turns made her body ‘whirl’ also created this impression (Taylor, 1956: 220), even though it is sometimes described as ‘violent’ (‘The Star Act’, 1922). Grace inhabits an ambiguous position within 1920s femininity because it can be read both as conventionally feminine due to its implication that the female body was not working under its own control, yet also as an attribute prized by modern girls (see Chapter 5 for a fuller description of these physical attributes).

In the circus setting, the property men who pulled Leitzel to the roof contributed to her weightlessness during this section of her act in a manner that complicated her representation of femininity (Kline, 2008: 209). During matinee performances these men were probably visible at the ring edge. Film of Leitzel’s act demonstrates that during these performances light filled the entire tent, whereas during evening performances spotlights allowed individual performers to be the only bodies highlighted (‘Home video

of Leitzel', n.d.; DeBaugh n.d.). In vaudeville and variety spaces these men would have been invisible, obscured by stage darkness, stage wings or curtains. When visible during circus matinees these property men would have troubled her demonstrations of bodily control: in one moment she would have appeared under their control, yet at the same time these property men would also have appeared as no more than incidental subordinates carrying out a risky requirement of her act. In the circus setting the more conservative reading of her act was available during the family friendly matinee performances, whilst during the evening the invisibility of the property men would have removed the possibility of this interpretation. Yet even when a conservative reading of Leitzel as vulnerable to male action is available, the modern reading where the property men are her subordinates dominates due to her regal costuming and designation as circus aristocracy.

Leitzel's performance style further accentuated this weightlessness whilst also demonstrating her control and enjoyment in her body. As has already been noted her performance style was very different to many of her contemporaries and to many aerialists working today. The experience of aerial performance is one where the convention is to hide the pain of steel bruising limbs or rope burning flesh. Yet pictures of Leitzel performing the planche turns show her smiling widely, or describe her laughter during performance despite the repetitive wrenching of her shoulder when gravity was at full force at the bottom of the swing (Cooper, 1931: 148; Atwell, 1930b). Rather than masking the pain of aerial performance, Leitzel instead demonstrated her exhilaration in her body's aerial action. This contributed to the sense that Leitzel was weightless but more importantly, demonstrated her enjoyment in her body's movements – much as the modern girl did when undertaking more moderate exercise.

However, this exhilaration in the planche turn movements was also turned into an activity that cost the body through the performed faint Leitzel used when a particularly impressive performance was required. Tait describes this as a 'gesture of frailness' that Carter considers to have been 'a *performed* loss of control on the ground, thereby resurrecting her conventional femininity' (Tait, 2007: 41; Carter, 2014: 97, emphasis in original). Although this activity performed her body as vulnerable increasing the perception of how much her body was at risk and thereby aligning it with conservative femininity, it can also be read as demonstrating the strength of Leitzel's body. Taylor's

description of the performed faint highlights how although she hit the ground, she never accepted the help offered (see p141 for Taylor's full description). Instead she valiantly demonstrated how she was independent in not requiring Mabel Clemings' assistance to leave the ring. The performed faint therefore acts as a reinstatement of conventional gender boundaries but immediately destabilises such a designation by demonstrating how the artist has the strength to continue unaided.

The composition of Leitzel's act is partially responsible for her acceptably performing such an extreme act of endurance as the planche turn. Alison Kibler considers Ruth Budd's aerial act to have been successful in vaudeville due to a construction which made her performances of masculine strength appear more remarkable after her displays of femininity (1999: 154). Budd and Leitzel were famously rivals in the circus during the earlier part of Leitzel's career around 1917 (Kline, 2008: 210–211; Bradna and Spence, 1953: 143–154; Davis, 2008: 335–6). However, Budd's demonstrations of femininity were much more conventional as they took place on the ground whilst Leitzel's took place on roman rings. Budd's feminine song and dance could escape any allusions to masculinity because they did not take place on aerial equipment that requires strength to complete movements. Leitzel's planche turns themselves were remarkable when performed by either gender, which leads me to view Leitzel's act differently. The way in which Leitzel performed her femininity by reference to its various expressions worked alongside the sequencing of her act to designate her personality as feminine – reframing her finale as a remarkable feminine demonstration of strength. The planche turns may have represented an exhibition of 'masculine' endurance but, as has already been demonstrated, Leitzel also performed her femininity through them – challenging a reading that genders them as purely masculine. This argument may explain why those who famously copied Leitzel's trademark planche turns during her career and in the years soon after her death were all women: Mickey King, Irma (also spelt Erma) Ward and Janet May (Kline, 2008: 213). The construction of Leitzel's act, to begin with a section that presented her as definitively feminine on aerial equipment whilst demonstrating strength, was powerful enough to reconfigure Leitzel's masculine endurance feat into a feminine aerial act type.

Sexual Tensions in Costume & Performance Style

Leitzel's costume demonstrates another tactic she used when balancing older and modern expressions of femininity to mitigate strength in her routine, but it also points to

how she performed sexual agency and her desirability. The references Leitzel's costume made to both expressions of femininity were complex and open to varied readings. Leitzel made very different choices about how to expose her body in different performance settings and it is the way in which she managed this exposure that demonstrates how significant sex and sexual agency were within her performance of femininity.



Figure 15 Atwell (circa 1925) Photograph of Lillian Leitzel hanging from Roman Rings, edit of CWi 873 glass plate negative, CW Small Collection 'Lillian Leitzel on rings and other apparatus folders', Circus World Museum, Baraboo, WI

Leitzel's costume demonstrates how she combined daintiness with bodily display on aerial equipment. Images that date from around 1925 show Leitzel wearing a costume that accentuates her female form:³⁸ her breasts, the prime outward signifiers of the

³⁸ A series of images of Leitzel taken by Harry Atwell show Leitzel in the same white costume and have been dated in the Circus World Museum catalogue as taken in 1928. The earliest reproduction I found of one of these images (Atwell, 1928a) appears edited in the 1925 New York *Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows The Greatest Show on Earth Daily Review Magazine* (Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus, 1925b); the magazine can probably be most simply described as a souvenir programme. For this reason, I consider the images as dated no later than 1925.

female body, are covered by two large triangles of fabric that stretch over her shoulders; her small waist is accentuated by a band that encircles it and includes the traditional feminine accessory of a flower; whilst the skirt evokes a ballet tutu as light chiffon-like fabric cascades in pleats over her hips; the shortness of the skirt exposes short trunks that elongate the apparent length of legs clothed in silk stockings; her feet covered by shoes that bear comparison to ballet pumps. In particular, examination of earlier and later photographs of Leitzel and a circus costume probably dated around 1931³⁹ show that Leitzel's balletic skirt emerged around 1920 and remained a feature of her costume until her death in 1931 (Daguerre, 1920; 'Leitzel's pink circus costume', n.d.). This costume worked in a similar manner to Leitzel's act. It drew upon conservative ideas of femininity through its similarities to ballet costume, the flower accessory and her choice to wear long hair rather than cutting it fashionably short. It is these elements that give the impression of daintiness when combined with Leitzel's short stature; yet it is modern to expose arms and clothe legs in fashionable silk stockings. Leitzel and other female circus stars such as May Wirth saw themselves marketing this particular commodity associated with the modern girl, when they endorsed the Mallinson's stocking brand in the 1919 Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey souvenir programme. Like Leitzel's act itself, her costume negotiated gender by presenting her body as conservatively dainty in a costume that invited sexualisation through bodily exposure.

Analysing this photograph my first instinct was that Leitzel's costume did not bear comparison to the fashions popularised by modern girl film stars like Louise Brooks – where is the drop-waist and de-emphasis on breasts and hips? However, Jennifer Posey draws links between Leitzel's 1926 costume as described in *Billboard* and Art Deco fashions. Posey identifies 'tubular or flat geometric shapes, construction on flashy embellishment with glittering findings' as some of the characteristics of Deco, later noting how 'The simple shape of Leitzel's wardrobe, accentuated by glittering rhinestones ...the short skirts and straight line silhouette gave her a youthful, girlish persona that de-emphasized her incredible physical strength' (2012a, n.p.). The link to Art Deco could be made more strongly by Posey, but what is interesting is that she reads the girlish appearance of the costume that I consider to reflect older femininity as

³⁹ The existence of two costumes in the Codona Family Collection suggests they were probably dated around the time of Leitzel's death in 1931. Following her death, some of Leitzel's belongings were sent back to her husband Alfredo Codona's family.

fashionably modern. Just as Leitzel's costume is open to readings that emphasize older or Art Deco fashions now, they must have been open to varied readings by the contemporary audiences of the 1920s.

Although Leitzel's costume did present her as conservatively dainty there is tension related to sex evident in her costume. The shortness of Leitzel's skirt invited sexualisation of her body, exposing more leg than the modern girl would have considered acceptable, whilst the 'simple shape, accentuated with glittering rhinestones, meant that the audience's attention was focused on the shape of her body' (Posey, 2012a: n.p.). Costume is separate from everyday wear and is acceptable provided exposure fits within the conventions of the particular performance space. It was safer for aerialists to expose or wear clothing that closely fitted arms and legs. However, Leitzel went far beyond the normal conventions of circus costuming and by the end of the 1920s was also exposing her midriff, a fashion of circus costume she pioneered ('Leitzel's pink circus costume', n.d.).

Leitzel influenced developments in circus costumes that slowly exposed more female flesh, but it was not the space in which she exposed the most of her unconventionally muscular female body. My research has sadly not uncovered descriptions of costumes or images of Leitzel performing in vaudeville and variety spaces. This made my encounter with the costume pictured below (Figure 16) particularly surprising – even when the exposure of the 1920s' showgirl and chorus girl in vaudeville, burlesque or revue is considered (Posey, 2012a: n.p.; Latham, 2000: 109). Every element is briefer, with the costume resembling less a short dress and more a bikini or lingerie. Even if I consider age to have degraded the elastic that holds the top in place, it still does not seem strong enough for the costume to retain its position during her violent planche turns – surely, a body stocking must have been worn underneath. Regardless, Leitzel's muscular female body would have been startlingly on display, with her sex emphasised due to the positioning of the glittering butterflies over breasts and in the proximity of the crotch. The slight ruffles of fabric at the hips evoke the circus ballet skirt but this is clearly a costume that sells sex more overtly within the American vaudeville and possibly the European variety context – particularly as these ruffles would have fallen away from her hips when her body was inverted. Within the context of vaudeville's more significant exposure, Leitzel made the decision to make her body appear closer to nudity to succeed.

This is where the tension regarding sex, exposure and agency becomes apparent: Leitzel deliberately positioned her body as a sexual object in order to claim sexual agency – much in the same way that fashionable modern girls exposed legs with the aim of claiming more sexual agency for themselves. What is radical is that Leitzel knowingly sexualised a body that was muscular, presenting it as desirable to mainstream audiences. Not only that, she demonstrated enjoyment of her sexual muscular body. Leitzel proudly gloried in her body's significant exposure of muscle rather than hiding it from view in the moment of performance.



Figure 16: Tegge, Timothy (2016) Photograph of Lillian Leitzel's Vaudeville/Variety Costume, Codona Family Collection from the collection of Timothy Noel Tegge/Tegge Circus Archives

Leitzel's active role in the sexual encounter disrupts any reading that seeks to position bodily exposure as indicating Leitzel was a passive sexualised subject under the control of a desiring gaze. This sexual tension is one that emerges not only from analysis of

costume but also by comparing descriptions of Leitzel's performance style in circus memoirs and her circus promotion. She is billed as and described by contemporaries as 'dainty' or as 'so little a girl', yet a potentially mundane moment at the start of her act is described in sexually suggestive terms: 'With an arch look that seemed to mean, Miss Rooney [an aerial colleague] felt, 'I've noticed *you* in particular; anything can happen,' she would kick off her mules slowly, as if in a prelude to something intensely personal, and men, quite literally, often started from the stands' (Taylor, 1956: 221). For a moment, replace Leitzel with Louise Brooks or Clara Bow and the activity and sexual assertiveness would be appropriate. In fact, the power of the performer's look to disrupt conventional readings of the male gaze is one that has already been noted earlier in this chapter with particular reference to the modern girl silent film star, Clara Bow. Jennie Rooney's statement that Leitzel's look meant 'anything can happen' suggests she expected to be a key instigator rather than a subordinate in any sexual activity. Her performance of sexual agency through the 'look' corresponds to modern femininity because it relied precisely on agency, independence and youthfulness – the very attributes that were causing concern about the divisions between genders becoming blurred in wider society.

Varied Press Presentations of Femininity & Strength

Although Leitzel's performance exists as a compelling argument for her negotiation of concepts of femininity and masculinity, it is vital to survey Leitzel's coverage in the press to cement the celebrity status she has gained in memoirs. The American press coverage of Leitzel discovered in the course of this research falls broadly into two camps: the first are virtually identical short articles placed in local press via the press book system prior to the Ringling-Barnum circus visiting a locale, and secondly, feature articles placed in national magazines (most frequently owned by media magnate and physical culturist, Bernarr MacFadden). Placement of articles suggests possible ways in which they might have affected the perception of her act within audiences' imaginations. Local press articles that heralded the circus would have influenced reception of her act; whilst national feature articles unrelated to the local event and read afterwards would have shaped recall in audience members' memories. What unites both of these sets of coverage is that they always focus on her femininity – often complicating the older and more modern expression in one signifier – alongside her strength.

In local coverage, surprisingly complex expressions of femininity are represented in these short articles. For instance, in one series her apparent decision to be a circus performer

rather than a concert pianist is framed as the apparently dichotomous ‘battle between music and muscle’ (‘World’s Greatest Aerial’, 1919; ‘Girl Greatest of All’, 1919; ‘Greatest Aerial’, 1919). Here Leitzel reflects an older expression through her cultured refinement as designated through her musical expertise, yet also has the modern girl’s desire for a career – whether that be in music or circus. Reports of her running a school for the circus children also situate her as both domestic in caring for children and as educated enough to understand how to help the children learn (Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus, 1926a). Other series of articles more clearly emphasise her modern spirit through her desire to fly once the circus season was completed and the (non-existent) clause in her Ringling-Barnum contract had lapsed (‘Girl Too Daring’, 1921; ‘Too Daring Even’, 1922).

Longer national feature articles provided an opportunity for more complex representations of Leitzel’s femininity. (See Table 1 for a breakdown of the attributes and activities surveyed here according to each article.) All of the articles examined repeat the local coverage’s mention of her musical accomplishments and describe her success as an aerialist. Most highlight her skill, ambition or sense of achievement in her work and situate her – and implicitly her strength – within a hereditary lineage of aerialists. All mention her as looking like a girl, being small, having small hands or being dainty, and either highlight her domesticity through activities such as sewing or meals, or through printing photographs of her performing exercises readers can duplicate within a domestic setting. Some journalists also link Leitzel’s performance feats, or the leisure activity of swimming, to her vital spirit in a similar way that the modern girl aligned her vitality to sports participation.

Table 2: Leitzel's attributes and activities as described in five national feature articles

	music	skill etc	lineage	smallness	domesticity	vitality
<i>Strength</i> (Paulinetti, 1923)	pp37, 41 & 42		pp37 & 42	p37		p74
<i>Physical Culture</i> (Williams, 1923)	pp31 & 92	p32	p93	pp30 & 31	pp30-32 (including exercises)	pp92 & 93
<i>Beautiful Womanhood</i> (Fellows, 1923)	p12	p12	p13	p12	p49	p31
<i>Liberty</i> (Queed, 1926)	p50	p51	p49	p50		
<i>Physical Culture</i> (Bradshaw, 1931)	p16	pp16 & 18	pp16 & 18	p36	p18	

In *Beautiful Womanhood* the varied representations of femininity and strength are described as different identities. The interviewer Elizabeth Fellows describes ‘meet[ing] many interesting people in one personality. A philosopher, a cultured, traveled woman of the world, an adoring daughter, a circus gymnast who glories in her work and – Aunt Lillie.’ (1923: 13) In this description both older and more modern femininity are jumbled together with a profession that requires strength. But, it is *Strength’s* description of Leitzel’s varied attributes that is particularly revealing when considering her celebrity: ‘It is perhaps natural that the fortunate possessor of such a beautiful form and such amazing strength should have buoyant health and spirits. Add to her physical gifts her intellectual accomplishments and you have the secret of the wonderful personality that captivates everyone who has the good fortune to meet this artiste personally’ (Paulinetti, 1923: 74). In this description it is her varied attributes that are responsible for Leitzel’s charisma as generated by newspaper coverage. What is striking is how copy reflects her performance of varied femininities in the ring. When read through the lens of older and modern expressions of femininity alongside masculine strength her charisma as generated across press and performance blurred gender boundaries – it emerges precisely from Leitzel’s expertise in gender negotiation at a time when this was a national issue in the UK & USA.

At the heart of Lillian Leitzel's charisma was her complicated performance of the societal concern regarding femininity and gender blurring both in press and in the live moment of performance. Her performance style relied heavily on her varied representations of femininity to such a high degree that it appeared as excessive – similar to popular 1920s silent film stars' expressions of femininity. Leitzel's performed femininity reframed acts of strength as feminine and, in doing so, made her act appear the epitome of femininity. In reflecting her time, her performance was predominantly modern but included conservative elements that aided its mainstream appeal. Leitzel's reframing is similar to the modern girl's reframing of fashion. Leitzel recreated a femininity for herself by navigating and combining traditional and modern expressions in her one persona. By performing this ambiguous femininity through the planche turn she was able to situate this remarkable feat of endurance and strength within the female repertoire. In performing her femininity she also navigated a tension between sexual agency and display. Her assertive persona designated Leitzel as the person with sexual agency, in control of who her potential sexual partner was, but she was also subject to a desiring gaze by inviting sexualisation through significant bodily exposure – particularly in vaudeville. Leitzel knowingly pushed the limits of bodily display within the circus, understanding that sexual desirability heightened the appeal of her act. However, because Leitzel's body was unconventional this became a radical act because it situated the muscular female body as desirable to mainstream audiences.

The Flying Codonas: the Ornamental Feminine Element

In the 1920s female solo aerialists were amongst circus' most significant celebrities, yet they did not occupy the same position in aerial troupes. The most popular troupe of the 1920s was the Flying Codonas flying trapeze troupe. The star of the troupe was Alfredo Codona who was the first man to perform the triple somersault reliably. It is Alfredo's triple and his flying expertise that is emphasized in publicity ('World's Most Famous' 1921: 10; 'Hey, Kids', 1921: 18) and Alfredo's name that heads their description in the Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey programme. Alfredo is 'Assisted in his amazing performances by the FLYING CODONAS' (Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus, 1927b). The text retained the same sense of assistance throughout the Flying Codonas time with the Ringling-Barnum circus, but was shortened in later programmes

featuring Alfredo as part of the troupe.⁴⁰) The troupe presented male expertise: Alfredo was the star of the Flying Codonas and Lalo Codona was required to catch him in his feat. Yet a woman was always present in the troupe despite the fact her role appears strangely redundant. The first female member of the Flying Codonas was Alfredo's first wife, Clara Curtin. Following their divorce, Vera Bruce was found as a replacement despite the fact she was less experienced as a circus aerialist and had more experience as an equestrian within the circus (Beal, 1938: 114–117). Why was a woman required as part of a troupe that relied so heavily on Alfredo's flying and Lalo's catching expertise? The answer lies in the necessity of including a feminine element within the act to appeal to contemporary concerns regarding women's role in society.

This question of why women appear to be a requirement in the Flying Codonas is especially pertinent when both Clara Curtin and Vera Bruce were not especially skilled aerialists. A letter written by Alfredo describes Clara's contribution to the act after she had decided to leave the troupe, stating that 'Clara never did more [*sic*] than 2 Leaps' (1928b: 1) Examination of *Variété* (1925) in which Clara, Lalo and Alfredo acted as body doubles during the flying sequences, indicates one of the two leaps: Clara flew to Lalo in a 'bird's nest' position with back curved and feet caught behind the ropes, was caught and performed the same position with feet resting against Lalo's shoulders before he returned her to the fly bar. Clara's starring sequence does not demonstrate anywhere near the virtuosity of the pirouettes or somersaults performed by Alfredo.

The same letter written to Alfredo's sister and brother-in-law, Victoria and Billy Adolph, describes great hopes for Vera but also emphasises her attractiveness as more important than her expertise: 'I got a Girl by the name of Vera Bruce who is a very nice looking Kid about 23. ... and I don't think I am mistaken She will make the best lady leaper in the country' (Codona, 1928b: 1). It appears that to be the female element in the Flying Codonas the first requirement was an attractive form, with aerial skill a trait that could be gambled upon. Despite Alfredo's great hopes a letter to Ringling circus manager, Pat Valdo three years later indicates Vera to have been a disappointment: 'I have practiced Vera real hard and She is improving' (Codona, 1931b: 1). The documentary of the Flying Codonas act *Swing High* (1932) also suggests Vera had a limited repertoire. Like Clara,

⁴⁰ Injury prevented Alfredo from performing in the 1933 season and for this reason the troupe's name is the only one listed in the programme (Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus, 1933b).

Vera performs only two tricks, both of which involve Alfredo. In the first she flies out hanging from Alfredo's shoulders, is caught by Lalo and returns to the fly bar. In the second, a more complex flying pass that required skill in timing movements, she flies out whilst curving her body over the bar in a planche position before being caught by Lalo. He returns her under the fly bar as Alfredo 'passes' Vera over the same bar, leaving it from a front balance position. Alfredo is then caught by Lalo whilst Vera returns to the flyer's platform. Vera does not perform a trick that allows her to shine in her own right, but instead adds variety to the male dominated act, allowing the Flying Codonas to perform more varied tricks, such as passes. The role Vera and Clara provided was not one of virtuosic skill on aerial equipment, but instead functioned to add variety and an ornamental feminine element to the act.

Clara and Vera did provide an important secondary assistant role for the men of the Flying Codonas but this assistance could as easily have been performed by another man as by a woman. Some return tricks require the fly bar to be held and released at precisely the right moment so that it is within easy reach of the flyer when they meet it. Circus journalist George Brinton Beal emphasises the timing involved in this, but at the same time highlights the secondary role this designated Vera and Clara in the act: 'To Vera Bruce went the delicate and important task of releasing the trapeze for the return of the great flyer after the catch had been made. The variation of split second timing on the part of Miss Bruce would have meant instant disaster to the returning flyer, cast off into space by the sturdy arms of the catcher' (1938: 251). In Beal's writing, Vera's (and therefore Clara's) most important skill or role in the troupe is not her flying skill but her timing and ability to assist the main male protagonists.

Publicity images in the Ringling-Barnum souvenir programmes emphasise the ornamental nature of Vera and Clara. The primary publicity images from 1929 to early 1932 (Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus, 1929b; 1930a; 1931b; 1932a) show Alfredo and Lalo flanking either Vera or Clara who both appear with fashionably bobbed hair. What is particularly interesting here is that the 1929 image features Clara despite the fact (highlighted in Alfredo's letter to Victoria and Billy Adolph) that she had left the troupe at the end of the 1928 Ringling-Barnum season. When a second image of the Flying Codonas is provided within the programme, such as in the 1929 tenting programme (Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus, 1929b), it is Alfredo's triple

somersault that is highlighted. Unsurprisingly this highlights Alfredo's and Lalo's contribution. What is remarkable about this image is that there are two versions of the photograph in the Codona Family Collection – an edited image that focuses on Alfredo and Lalo's skill and another larger image that shows a woman standing on the board at the edges of the photo ('Photograph of Lalo Codona catching Alfredo', n.d.; 'Photograph with woman on the flyer's platform', n.d.). These photographs emphasise Clara and Vera's ornamental role within the Codonas.

The requirement for a decorative feminine element appears to be well known by circus journalists. KS Bartlett in 1935 noted a trend in the gendered make-up of most acts: 'In most flying acts the feminine third – three is the conventional number for a flying act, ... is just "the girl in the act," there for decorative purposes, to "trim the act," and to spell the principal' (1935). The ornamental feminine element was clearly necessary and this certainly appears to be the reason for both Vera and Clara's inclusion in the Flying Codonas – proving that women were required within an act for aerial success. However, in the same article, Bartlett also highlights the Flying Concellos as an act that was breaking this mould by the mid-1930s. When Alfredo Codona first saw them in 1931 he predicted the future of Antoinette Concello in a letter to Ringling manager Pat Valdo that may have influenced their movement from the Sells Floto circus to the prestigious Ringling-Barnum unit: 'The Girl is Excellent. [*sic*] and with a good teacher She would be An Artist' (Codona, 1931b: 1, emphasis in original). Although her husband Art Concello perfected the triple before she did, Art considered Antoinette the star of the act (Beal and Concello, n.d.: 2). Once Alfredo and Vera had left the Codonas act and it was no longer a family concern, Lalo adapted it to include female expertise, probably as a response to the Concellos success. Lalo recruited Clayton Beehee and Rose Sullivan⁴¹ to make the new trio and records Rose as performing a two and a half somersault which the flyer catches by the feet, with 95% reliability (1937: 2). However, in the 1920s Antoinette and the Flying Concellos were still to become popular and, as the most famous aerial troupe of the decade, the Flying Codonas observed the convention of an ornamental feminine third.

⁴¹ Once Lalo was grounded by an injury at the Cirque Medrano in November 1937 Rose Sullivan and Clayton Beehee were joined by Everett White to fulfil their Bertram Mills Circus contract, becoming the Flying Behees (Mills, 1937; Jando, n.d.).

Vera and Clara fulfilled the ornamental feminine element of the troupe in the 1920s and early 1930s and in doing so reflected concerns about women's role in society. The Flying Codonas considered it necessary to include a woman to be successful and to become a celebrity troupe. Yet, they did not need the woman to demonstrate skill – a fact that illustrates that aerial celebrity in this period reflected concerns around the role of women. It was a convention for aerial troupes to include a woman regardless of her skill level and for her to fulfil the role of assistant to the male members of the act. This necessity for a female component demonstrates that women needed to be included within a troupe but that within these troupes they must not outshine the men. I have already demonstrated how female aerial soloists negotiated gender concerns through performance, reflecting an ambiguity regarding the role of women in 1920s culture. In including a 'feminine third' within their act, the Flying Codonas were negotiating gender in presenting female aerialists who were not virtuosic. Although the women of the Flying Codonas demonstrated some female strength and reflected the modern girl's bodily control, the emphasis sat more heavily on reinstating the gender hierarchy. The core troupe of the Flying Codonas never elevated their female members beyond the level of the ornamental feminine element and interchangeable assistant during the 1920s and early 1930s. It was only when their success declined in the late 1930s due to the troupe's changing composition that competition forced them to include female expertise. To be a celebrity troupe in the 1920s as well as a celebrity soloist required you reflect the contemporary concern with gender blurring, even if it was only to present the woman as an ornament rather than as a virtuosic central star.

Conclusion: Female Muscularity

A core reason female aerialists were popular performers was because they embodied a concern in society that centred on women and gender blurring in the 1920s. The performances of female soloists and aerial performers within mixed troupes presented complex representations of femininity that negotiated gender and spoke of what it meant to be a woman in different ways. In much the same way as the modern girl was negotiating femininity by reframing what it meant to be a woman, solo female aerialists were performing their femininity as predominantly modern but with enough traditional attributes to allow it to appeal to conservative audience members. In the most complex cases one sign could be interpreted in varied ways: medals could appear as ambitiously modern or as ornamental as a brooch, whilst a dress could appear gracefully balletic or fashionably Art Deco. The multiple readings opened up by their gender negotiation

made them attractive to a wide variety of audience members who were able to create their desired image of the solo female aerialist through their preferred reading. In Lillian Leitzel's celebrity image the representations of traditional and modern femininities were complex enough that contemporaries expressed them as separate identities that they considered the source of her charismatic appeal. It is the level of this complexity that separates Leitzel from popular stars such as Leers whose act relied a little too heavily on strength. However, within the mixed gender troupe setting the convention to include an ornamental feminine element is significant. It confirms the importance of representing women *somewhere* within an act for success, thereby reflecting and confirming that this was necessary for celebrity within this period. However, the proviso was that the female element did not directly challenge male superiority by presenting virtuosity alongside male skill.

In navigating and recreating their femininity, aerial female soloists such as Leers and Leitzel navigated their sexual desirability. Leers' act demonstrated poses that emphasised her flexibility and presented her body as strangely sexually passive; whereas Leitzel deliberately presented her body exposed for financial gain, selling a brand of sex that incorporated sexual agency. By today's standards the deliberate objectification of the body to gain success would be problematic but by the standards of the 1920s this was in line with strategies used by film stars such as Mae West or modern girls in wider society. However, included within this deliberate objectification was a radical act: Leitzel demonstrated her own exhilaration in her muscular sexual body and contributed to its sexualisation through exposure. This presentation of her unconventional female body as desirable in the mass entertainment circus industry opened up the possibilities of what could be a desirable female body.

Leitzel performed and negotiated her femininity so expertly that she reframed the element of her act that relied most clearly on strength as a female performance activity – leading this feat to be situated within the female repertoire in the years following her death. This relied on her performing her varied femininities *through* the endurance feat using a sexually desirable body. The fact she appeared definitively feminine performing this feat demonstrates she had succeeded in proving that ‘Strength is strength... It is a matter of nerves and muscles, irrespective of whether you are masculine or feminine. ...Lots of women are stronger than men if they train for it, if they use their strength to

develop energy. Really it is all a question of how much life you have in you. Life is strength and strength is life' (in Williams, 1923: 92). Leitzel's claiming and reframing of strength as the preserve of women as well as men proves that strength is not only a masculine attribute. It is by being lauded in public for feminine strength powered by a desirable female body that aerialists like Leitzel contributed to the inclusion of strength within some feminine ideals. However, the reframing of strength as a human attribute also required addressing what was open to attack for being masculine as well as representing strength as feminine. In the final chapter I will explore the claims of masculinity levelled against the athletic modern girls who exercised, using British and American rhetoric regarding female exercise and the strategies women used to reveal how aerial soloists countered concerns of masculinity.

5. The Female Aerialist and Female Exercise: Absorbing Female Activity into Femininity

The active stereotype of the modern girl was a global phenomenon that transcended class boundaries throughout developed countries as culturally different as Japan and Australia. In the previous chapter I demonstrated how this new expression of femininity relied on an energetic spirit that was linked to a lively body. The energy of the modern girl was both a response and a reason for the increased cultural interest in health and exercise in the 1920s. This was the moment when women began to participate in the leisure activity of exercise across demographic groups, with an active body providing the vital spark of energy that gave modern girls their vim and vigour. The cultural significance of exercise also led to increased opportunities to view sport as popular entertainment and to the establishment of physical culture publications. In the USA these lifestyle magazines such as *Physical Culture* were sold on the newsstands, whereas in the UK they were often distributed as part of membership of lobbying or fitness organisations such as the Health and Strength League (Zweiniger-Bargielowska 2011: 151-192). Health and fitness were of cultural significance in the interwar period with a wider interest in ‘physical culture’ including healthy eating and hygiene. The societal concern with health, fitness, and if you were female, beauty, was linked to good citizenship. The cultural interest in female exercise is part of what made female aerialists so popular and provides some of the answers as to how and why they were able to reframe their competitive muscular feats of bodily control and endurance as feminine.

Movement forms such as dance do not suggest the same link to exercise as aerial performance. The approach that follows is suggested by the previous chapters that consider how experiencing aerial performance is related to each individual’s bodily experience of movement. But, it is also suggested by a repetitive practice that has the power to reconfigure musculature in a similar manner to the modern exercise craze of cross-fit. In performing on aerial equipment, aerialists pull and balance their bodyweight – a practice that requires muscular control and strength. Aerial performers exist at an intersection: they perform as entertainers but their performances of bodily virtuosity are also feats whose appeal is sold on their competitive athleticism, and that causes their bodies to sweat and burn calories. The practice redefines the performer’s body, creating a

more muscular upper body for female performers. In my case, as an amateur, the most visible expression of this is in more developed latitudinal muscles and biceps that have led my body to move further from an apparently ‘normal’ female body shape.

Terminology used by the aerial community also suggests the blurred line between exercise and performance: we ‘train’ our practice and ‘rehearse’ the act in the ‘training space’. Some performers also transfer skills from sport to circus with many Cirque du Soleil performers benefiting from prior experience as elite or even Olympic gymnasts.⁴² However, as has been demonstrated through the example of Leitzel described throughout this thesis, to be a truly great aerialist you need to be a good entertainer who performs their gender, vulnerability and skill. For this reason, it is necessary to consider female aerialists as athletes *and* performing artists: to analyse them as athlete-performer-entertainers.

This examination of aerialists in light of the role of physical exercise in culture is also suggested by the use of the term physical culture in US circus advertising from the 1920s and early 1930s. The solo aerialist Luisita Leers was most strongly associated with such movements with Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey dubbing her as the ‘physical culture marvel’ in one article or an ‘exponent of physical culture’ in a similar series of articles placed in local press via the press book system (‘Ringling Bros.’, 1931; ‘Young European’, 1931; ‘Luicita Leers, European Star’, 1932). A playbill or herald that highlights Leitzel’s appearance, prior to Leers’ first engagement with the Ringling-Barnum unit in 1928, demonstrates that aerialists were one of a number of circus disciplines which were sold by press agents on the basis of their epitomising this physical culture ideal. Under an emboldened heading: ‘New and Advanced Exponents of Modern Physical Culture’, it goes on to state: ‘The Most Wonderful Aerialists of the Age. The Most Famous Gymnasts of Every Country together with All Earth’s Most Remarkable Athletes Are Here Assembled’ (Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus, n.d.). Those who promoted circus were using the increasing interest in physical culture as a rationale to sell tickets and this analysis focuses on what this athletic model can reveal about the female aerialist.

⁴² Inevitably around the Olympics articles publicising Cirque du Soleil highlight the career opportunities they provide for retired Olympians, emphasising this as a deliberate recruitment strategy to differing degrees (Fowler, 2012; Whiteside, 2016).

It is true that the early twentieth century was the period when the female body was seen performing more dynamic movements in other performance fields such as modern dance. The female body was not just presenting graceful movements founded on balletic discipline, but more expressive movements. However, those who watched the performances of dancers such as Isadora Duncan in the 1900s and 1910s were not the diverse audiences of the circus but were the elite who were more interested in highbrow rather than popular culture (Daly, 1995: 19). Martha Graham, a closer contemporary of the aerialists who I focus upon in this study, began to create influential works from the early 1930s. Victoria Thoms describes Graham as influential in 'the founding of modern dance as an important and worthy form of art' and positions her alongside other figures of high culture such as Stravinsky and Picasso (2013: 6 & 3). The interest in physical culture was instead one that transcended class boundaries and has important links to the increase in sport spectatorship as popular entertainment. Circus' audience configuration also suggests sport with its varied viewing positions, rather than salon dances' conventional end-on positioning. Considering aerialists in light of the physical movements women engaged in situates aerial performance alongside the popular activity of sports participation and spectatorship in the 1920s; this allows room for speculation on how audiences experienced this popular entertainment.

Tait considers the unusually developed upper body musculature to have marked female performers of the 1920s and early 30s as 'socially different' outside their act (2005: 77), whereas during their act they were able to 'defy the gravity of social categories' (1996b: 33). This raises a number of questions for me: how and why were performers so popular outside the moment of performance, gaining mainly favourable publicity in the press, if they were so socially different? Why were some of the most popular performers so successful demonstrating endurance acts, or tricks that no other man or woman could perform? (Although Chapter 3 has concluded that endurance acts made strength more acceptable by combining it with an increased level of vulnerability that was gendered as such, it is only a partial answer). Was there something empowering in viewing strong and muscular female bodies? Using the model of aerialists as athlete-performer-entertainers provides a way of thinking about the acceptability of female aerialists' bodies inside and outside the circus in the 1920s and early 1930s. It affords the opportunity to consider if female aerialists were popular partly because their bodies tapped into a specifically interwar interest related to female exercise.

I begin by describing the role of female exercise in British and American society, outlining some of the activities performed by women. Exercising women of different social groups were affected in differing ways by three ‘problems’: visible exertion, competition and muscularity. I use these problems, and the strategies used by women exercising, to explore how the aerial celebrity Lillian Leitzel and rising star Luisita Leers navigated such issues: by tapping into rhetorics connecting exercise to citizenship, by performing class, by glamorising the very bodies that risked censure for their muscularity, and by employing a separatist strategy that allowed soloists’ impressive feats to appear free from comparisons to men.

Female Physical Exercise in the 1920s and early 1930s

The 1920s was a significant period for the development of physical culture generally in both the US and UK. Sport and sports participation were part of a growing mass leisure culture. Its consumables were spectator sports, clothing, life-style magazines and exercise classes. In making competition a central part of the attraction of spectator sports, a number of sportsmen and women were created as achieved celebrities. Alongside large scale spectator sports, a variety of local amateur events featuring women were popular with spectators, sometimes attracting audiences in the thousands on both sides of the Atlantic. These included mixed gender swimming galas, women’s athletics, hockey and work sports days in the UK (Hargreaves, 1994: 126 & 131; Skillen, 2013: 63, 139 & 158) and ‘poolsides, tracks and basketball arenas’ in the USA (Cahn, 2015: 45). The central position of sport in interwar society is further demonstrated through its reference in the marketing of a variety of products such as creams, perfumes and deodorants that were frequently endorsed by sports stars (Skillen, 2012: 760; 2013: 223), much as Lillian Leitzel endorsed silk stockings and ginger pills (Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus, 1919; 1922).

Although some of the changes that led to exercise becoming a popular part of both American and British culture started earlier, by the 1920s exercise was open to a wider demographic of women (Cahn, 2015: 31–82; Skillen, 2012; Hargreaves, 1994: 112–144). As has already been described in the previous chapter, this was the first time that large numbers of women had an independent expendable income, but it was also the first time they had access to leisure in terms of sports activities and goods (Skillen, 2012: 752). Internationally, these modern girls were using commodity culture to define themselves

and to break with earlier more passive expressions of femininity (Søland, 2000, 13 & 17; Barlow *et al.*, 2005; Kent, 2009: 39–40). Sports participation and physical activity became an essential part of women's engagement in modernity and the ideal of a vibrant modern girl (Søland, 2000: 48; Skillen, 2012: 752; Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 2011; Skillen, 2013). For women, the rhetoric around fitness was linked to beauty because 'beauty depended on health which was a precondition of fitness' (Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 2010: 6). However, women's activity was not just a personal concern related to individual identity, but it was also a national concern. In 1919 the British government created a physical exercise syllabus whilst America followed a little later – in 1921 twenty states required exercise as part of their curriculum, rising to forty-six by 1929 (Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 2010: 159; Cahn, 2015: 57; Verbrugge, 2012: 3). Women's exercise was both an individual and a national concern.

The national concern in each country included a similar rhetoric regarding healthy reproduction for different reasons. In England the First World War had reinvigorated concerns that the nation was unfit for another war due to the high numbers of men rejected for military service. The issue was, Lloyd George stated, that 'You cannot maintain an A 1 Empire with a C 3 nation' (cited in Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 2010: 151). Women may not be expected to go to war, but their civic duty paralleled men's because its aim was to perpetuate the British Imperial nation through healthy 'race mothers', whose desirability rested on their active bodies (Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 2011: 238 & 313). By playing sports women, like their male counterparts, could also acquire the moral attributes required to be a responsible citizen (Skillen, 2013: 35). This character training was expressed in the USA as 'instruct[ing] girls in cooperation, fair play, and other attributes of good citizenship' (Cahn, 2015: 74). Although the phrase 'race mother' does not seem to be used about the American context, this was part of the rhetoric of female exercise with women expected to cultivate healthy bodies capable of reproducing healthy male Americans (Cahn, 2015: 77). Dyreson has demonstrated that 'Americans increasingly understood sport as ...one of the many items available for amusement in a culture which glorified consumption', rather than being primarily a tool for social reform in the 1920s (1989: 261). This being the case, then female exercise may have cultivated the beneficial character traits outlined above, but it also contributed to being an active participant in a successful commodity culture that contributed to the global economic power of America. In England participating in female exercise had political implications

and was about ensuring a healthy British Empire, whereas in the USA it was about furthering America's power by being a fair-playing consumer.

It is therefore surprising that this pivotal period in women's sports history has received little scholarly attention. Sports designation as a predominantly masculine pursuit is a likely reason, as are problems of limited data particularly related to workplace provisions and some public facilities such as swimming baths (Guttmann, 1991: 143; Skillen, 2013: 139). As a result, this period tends to feature in longer chronologies of female sport and sports education (Guttmann, 1991; Hargreaves, 1994; Fletcher, 1984; Cahn, 2015; Verbrugge, 2012) or as individual articles (Horwood, 2000; Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 2011; Skillen, 2012; Matthews, 1990). Only recently has scholarship begun to focus in more detail on the period in the United Kingdom (not the US), considering the importance of male and female physical culture from 1880-1939 (Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 2010) or female sports participation in Scotland during the interwar period (Skillen, 2013). What emerges from the literature is a diverse range of sport played by women, whose uptake was influenced by their social status, position in their lifecycle, geographical location and access to facilities – a relationship that defies brief categorisation. Although it can be said that most exercise occurred prior to marriage and motherhood, some women did gain access to facilities at times that fitted with childcare commitments (Cahn, 2015: 44; Skillen, 2012: 755; Hargreaves, 1994: 113; Skillen, 2013), Fiona Skillen's detailed study (2013) has challenged Jennifer Hargreaves' statement that the working classes had to be relatively affluent to exercise (1994: 113). Instead Skillen demonstrates that workers and the unemployed had opportunities to take part in the same types of exercise as the middle classes but that time and money facilitated access, enhancing the 'quality of experience' (2013: 234).

Skillen's use of the word 'quality' must be understood on a continuum because sport occupied an important social aspect within women's lives on both sides of the Atlantic. Exercise took women outside the domestic setting and provided them with opportunities for single-sex and mixed-sex socialisation within the pursuit and the social activities that surrounded it (Matthews, 1990; Skillen, 2013: 233; Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 2010: 124; Cahn, 2015: 39). Most exercise was completed as a separate female-only pursuit but rare mixed-sex activities included swimming and tennis. Due to the majority of provision being based at a community level, it also strengthened local identity which for ethnic

minorities in America was particularly significant because it ‘enhance[d] racial pride’ (Cahn, 2015: 39). Although it is fruitless to try and unpick exactly who performed what, it is useful to give an overview of the range of exercise available to women throughout America and England, which included: gymnastics (including rhythmic gymnastics), callisthenics, Swedish Drill, swimming, hiking, camping, athletics (in America known as track and field), hockey, formal dance (including modern dance in England), informal dancing in nightclubs, keep-fit, badminton, netball, bowling, rowing, rounders, softball, football, basketball, baseball, croquet, golf and tennis. What separates the sport provision for these classes of women is less the activities they undertook but more the concerns their active bodies prompted.

The bodies that raised the most concerns were those located predominantly in the middle of both British and American social hierarchies. It was these women who prompted concerns about visible exertion, muscularity and competition; attributes that were contentious because they involved female public bodily displays of what were considered predominantly masculine activities. College and University educators frequently combated concerns about the apparently masculine nature of exercise by framing female exercise as different or separate from men’s sport, keeping men and women separate and developing new rules specifically for female versions. In the USA, concerns related to competition led to conflicts over sports such as athletics and basketball (Cahn, 2015: 56–57). The key strategy employed by most American and some European physical educators in the first two decades of the twentieth century was to reframe exercise as female because it characterised ‘moderation’ rather than competition (Cahn, 2015: 8–9 & 63; Hargreaves, 1994: 30). Moderation led American physical educators, who had first used this separatist strategy to promote female sport, to oppose women’s involvement in the Olympics and to encourage students in non-competitive activities. These included recreational clubs running activities such as hiking and camping, ‘Play Days’ where colleges would play in mixed college teams, and ‘telegraphic meets’ for individual events such as athletics where colleges would wire participants results to another institution (Guttmann, 1991: 135–153; Cahn, 2015: 55–82; Verbrugge, 2012: 107). The latter was designed as a ‘more competitive alternative’, indicating that female students desired the competitiveness of sport (Cahn, 2015: 66). Although moderation was the established approach Verbrugge has demonstrated that competition was not universally outlawed by all colleges, but that it was a contentious issue that

threatened established codes of white and black American femininity (2012: 102–152). Although female competitiveness was an issue in England, it was available to many women through the various female sports associations established in the period that managed leagues and matches (Skillen, 2013). Although perceptions around competition may have been changing in England, the topic was constantly debated throughout the period, and it was still deemed contentious enough that a commission was appointed to consider the topic in 1939 (Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 2010: 256–7; 2011: 308 & 309).

However, linked to competitiveness are the elements it relies on: visible exertion and muscular development. Competitiveness requires strong muscles, and involves an athlete demonstrating visible exertion. Concerns were raised in America that women would become the stereotype of the ‘mannish athlete’ and that they instead should demonstrate modesty and self-control (Cahn, 2015: 74). Women were breaking out of the private sphere of the home into the public and very male sphere of exercise. In England the British press raised concerns that the muscles developed by athletes created the ‘sexless gymnast’ (Fletcher, 1984: 75 & 76). This figure was one in which two concerns met: at once women were required to exercise to be healthy and beautiful race mothers, yet at the same time they needed to avoid muscles that led to accusations of mannishness. Both Britain and America may have desired healthy and fit women to ensure strong nations, but both were negotiating how the ‘masculine’ attributes associated with exercise fitted within this new model of active womanhood. Active womanhood challenged the apparent masculine-feminine dichotomy and the debates around it confirm the previous chapter’s contention that gender blurring was a societal concern, whilst demonstrating that women were challenging and changing what femininity meant. Although exercise was part of being a modern girl, the associations of competition, muscles and visible exertion with traditional masculinity was problematic, but did not prevent women from challenging these preconceptions for their own enjoyment on both sides of the Atlantic.

Those at either end of the social hierarchy avoided many of the concerns levelled at those in the middle. Both in England and America women at the bottom and the top of society were insulated in different ways. Those at the bottom who were employed could access sport through: workplace welfare schemes; activities provided by membership organisations such as the British Health and Strength League or Women’s League for Health and Beauty (that was to some extent cross-class); socialist organisations; church

and neighbourhood clubs; social welfare agencies and municipal provisions that were growing throughout the period (Cahn, 2015: 42; Hargreaves, 1994: 124-125 & 138; Skillen, 2012; Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 2011: 310-312; 2010: 237, 246 & 251-3; Guttmann, 1991: 143). Some of the latter provided facilities at reduced rates to the unemployed, opening facilities up to even the very poor (Skillen, 2013: 119). Although women were not the focus of all of these organisations they often embraced their activities, in many cases becoming involved in competitive leagues. Workplace welfare schemes were provided as a means of attempting to create efficient, happy workers – an aim that gains extra significance when it is set against the context of repeated strikes during the 1920s (Cahn, 2015: 42; Skillen, 2013: 154). In both the UK and USA, an aim of exercise was to create women as healthy workers as well as healthy mothers – these were individuals who contributed to the capitalist economy and whose competition could be framed as part of being an efficient worker (Skillen, 2013: 169). Not only would competitiveness be more acceptable for working women due to its furthering of industry, but different rules of propriety applied to women situated at the bottom of the social structure. These women were perceived as lacking modesty, having less self-control and more interest in sex (Cahn, 2015: 75). This perception alters how immodest visible exertion, muscle and competition appeared and was something popular promoters in the USA used to their advantage. ‘Commercial sponsors often generated interest by promoting events as novelties or glamour exhibitions, touting them as spectacles of fantastic skill and youthful beauty’ (Cahn, 2015: 42). Drawing on the link between health and beauty, and competitiveness as an attribute of an efficient workforce, had the power to reframe exercising women as feminine.

For those at the top of the social structure competition was less of an issue due to the way in which their status framed public displays of visible exertion. Elite women were able to compete in golf, tennis and equestrianism in exclusive private clubs, insulated by privacy, wealth and status (Cahn, 2015: 30). Adventure sports such as climbing, sailing and skiing were common to affluent and leisured British women, with only the very rich able to afford car racing and aviation. Such ‘fashionable’ activities enabled them to ‘display their affluence and social standing’ (Cahn, 2015: 14; Hargreaves, 1994: 118). For competition to be acceptable, an elite woman needed to display the power her social and financial status conferred or needed to be withheld from public view.

What emerges from this very brief outline of female exercise in the USA and UK in the interwar period is that female sport participation was linked to being an active and social modern girl. Not only did the interest in sport contribute to the vibrant spirit associated with the modern girl, it was also wrapped up in ideas of good citizenship, community and social status. The problem for young women was that visible exertion involved risking claims of immodest display by appearing in public sweating in short clothing, even if they appeared separately from men. More problematically, female exercise was part of wider concerns with gender blurring because of sport's traditional association with the male domain. Issues of mannishness or masculinity were most closely bound up in the problem of muscle created from competitive exercise. Social standing presents some answers to competition, with the lower classes exercising to create healthy efficient workers, and the elite competing behind closed doors or as a means of demonstrating affluence and social standing; whereas for the middle-classes the safest strategy was moderation, even if this might not lead to the greatest degree of satisfaction for participants.

Examining the performances of female aerialists in the light of female exercise reveals a number of points of contact. Women exercising were using sports participation as a way of aligning themselves with ideal of the vibrant modern girl but were simultaneously navigating concerns related to their femininity. The same concerns that led to accusations of masculinity in young exercising women could be levied at female aerialists: immodest visible exertion, muscularity and competition. Put simply, female aerial performers were displaying muscular bodies that performed high levels of physical exertion in the competitive popular entertainment industries of circus and vaudeville or variety. I use the examples of the solo aerialists, Luisita Leers and Lillian Leitzel to explore how female solo aerialists navigated these issues – particularly as their finales were competitive endurance acts. It is my argument throughout this thesis that these women were feminine despite the presence of attributes such as muscularity that might traditionally be considered masculine and that they were part of a wider movement that made female strength more acceptable.

The Problem of Visible Exertion

Comparing the levels of physical exercise undertaken by different classes of women in wider society presents aerialists as exceptional. If we examine the performances of both Leers and Leitzel, we find them performing acts that required considerable muscular

control that were well outside the limits of moderate exercise or the more vigorous activities provided by those at the top or the bottom of the social structure. The elite adventure activities of skiing, sailing or climbing may arguably be closer to those conducted by aerialists in including vigour tinged with danger, but neither required the high levels of muscular control and exertion presented in such a public setting. Female aerialists were presenting their performances as part of mainstream culture and could not have been immune to concerns regarding female visible exertion. I explore the concept of visible exertion across two areas: bodily control and experiencing aerial movement as both graceful and frenetic.

Bodily Control

The following descriptions of sections of Leitzel and Leers' performances illustrate the types of movement on display, relating their performances to women's experiences of movement. Aerialists were accepted and even glamorised because they tapped into empowering ideas of body ownership, citizenship and modern femininity. The glamorisation of female aerialists is central to their acceptability in the mainstream: presented as aristocrats, they were set apart from the rest of society in the same way that affluence protected some elite women from the very same concerns regarding visible exertion.

Leers' act on solo static trapeze in particular relied on strength, flexibility and grace throughout. The majority of her act involved her movement between static positions such as shoulder and back balances and one of her signature moves, a neck-hang with side-splits (Atwell, 1931a; 1931c; 1931b; 1931c; 1931c; n.d.; n.d.; Scala n.d.). Even the endurance part of her act, what I have found described as an elbow roll in my own aerial training but what Leers called a muscle grind, was controlled. With her hands on a trapeze bar that was braced against her mid-back area, she used gravity to create the requisite momentum with which to revolve her body around the trapeze bar. Her body sped as she tipped forward in a slight v-shape over the bar, and slowed as it came under, where she curved her body up and over to complete each revolution. These were controlled revolutions that looped in speed: accelerating downward and slowing as her body curved up and over, whirling continuously for up to 100 revolutions ('Girl Trapeze Star', 1929; 'Luisita Leers - Seventeen', 1953: 13). Leers' movement throughout her act would have retained a controlled appearance both in the static poses she presented and the more dynamic elbow roll revolutions she performed.

The first portion of Leitzel's act was similarly controlled as she moved between static positions on her roman rings. The emphasis with Leitzel was on transitions as she used strength and momentum to push her body into positions on different rings – varying the pace for maximum effect. One example involved rolling her body quickly or controlling it slowly from a single arm planche on the right, where the entire bodyweight is held behind the chest from the right arm with the body curving over straight, to a single arm planche on the left. The transition from the body curved over one arm to the other arm, creates a rolling movement where the weight slows on the way into the position and speeds as it drops out. Leitzel used transitions to create the momentum with which to spin her body underneath in static positions such as one reminiscent of the *retiré*, using swivels rigged into her roman rings (DeBaugh, n.d.).

What is central to both of these descriptions of movement is the quality of movement on display: both present bodily control by female soloists. Although both of these women did appear with attendants in the ring, they were displaying their movements in the air alone. Each act was developed from an aerial repertoire that was founded on their individual bodies' capabilities and that, most importantly for audience members, originated from their individual bodies. This ownership of movement was communicated to audiences via one explicit and one implicit method: the announcer's statements positioning the performer as the only or first person to perform a feat, and through the fiction that the aerialist was risking death by pushing her body to its very limits (see Chapter 3). In the implicit and explicit framing of the act, female aerialists were demonstrating that a woman could create an act out of her strengths and that she had control over her own body. It is hard not to read something empowering into watching such movements.

However, reading public displays of female bodily control as empowering does not go uncontested by scholars of exercise and physical culture, who are careful to consider the possible limitations. Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska argues that 'Fitness culture was part of women's liberation' in the interwar period, whilst highlighting that this brand of feminism had its limitations and was essentially conservative (2011: 312 & 301). This was not a form of feminism that changed politics or that sought for a complete reconfiguration of relations between the sexes, but it was one that visibly contested

Victorian arguments that the female body could be overstrained by exercise. It is in this latter point that I read movement as more empowering than Zweiniger-Bargielowska – there is something potent in such a visible challenge to ingrained ideas. It is true that publicly visible movement did not change policies, but to consider changes in perception as conservative underestimates that power of movement. For women attending the circus it was empowering to experience female solo aerialists demonstrate physical control and strength – a statement I expand upon later in this chapter by emphasising the learning potential of the kinaesthetic system.

Solo female aerialists had been performing from the earliest days of the movement discipline's popularity in the 1860s and it is true that this same empowering potential was present in these earlier performances. Tait has argued that the entirety of aerial history 'unfolds as a history in which bodies performing action contribute to changing perceptions of physicality. Physical and social spaces converge as bodies performing action contribute to changing perceptions of physicality' (2005: 147). What makes the 1920s special is the social and cultural context in which the aerial body was expressing current concerns. Speaking around the time Gertrude Ederle successfully swam the British Channel alone in 1926, former suffrage leader Carrie Chapman Catt highlighted the emancipatory power of public female physical success, stating that 'woman's freedom would go hand in hand with her bodily strength' (in Cahn, 2015: 52). The performances in the 1920s of Leers and Leitzel were appearing at a time when a female body demonstrating independent physical control was a potent symbol of female freedom.

The political power of demonstrating bodily control could also be understood through the associations of female physical exercise connected to citizenship. In the same aerial history quoted above, Tait considers Leers and Leitzel to have had an advantage in being German due to the 'country's centrality to the development of gymnastics' (2005: 85). However, Leitzel in particular had been working in America since just after the First World War, when German nationality had been a problem rather than an advantage. In 1919 Leitzel makes pains to state in one American newspaper article that 'I have, too, my papers which make me a citizen of this great country. And I pride them above most everything' ('Talented Lillian Leitzel', 1919). She also appeared at Bertram Mills Circus in London as 'America's Greatest Gymnast' (Bertram Mills Circus, 1922). Although the issues of a German nationality were less problematic by 1928 when Leers first started

performed in the Ringling-Barnum unit, she is listed in the programme as having ‘astounded all Europe’ or ‘two continents’ (Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus, 1928a; 1928b). She is also later described as Dutch in a biography of the wire-walker Karl Wallenda (Morris, 1976: 86 & 87). Materials found in the course of writing this thesis present Leers’ nationality as more closely aligned with being European and Leitzel’s with being an American citizen, rather than either being of specifically German descent.

Nationality in the circus is fluid, with citizenship based upon what is most commercially beneficial at the time in terms of political and exotic associations. Tait herself highlights how national identities were hard for audiences to identify and were therefore exploited for commercial gain, recounting the anecdote of a Japanese act changing its nationality to Chinese during the Second World War (2005: 87–8). Nationality is not inscribed on the body in the same way as ethnicity, leading me to propose that a physically active female body tapped into national ideas of citizenship in the present moment of performance. (Although the example provided on p106 – where I projected myself into *Bianco*’s male aerialist’s body, imagining and anticipating his movements – indicates that the kinaesthetic fantasy of aerial movement may have the possibility to transcend differences in race if it can transcend gender.) Particularly in the case of Leers and Leitzel, white members of the audience in both countries would have been linked through their similarity to these white bodies, rather than potentially distanced by race. In the United States the physically similar white body may have inspired more general ideas of good citizenship and commercial responsibility, whereas in the United Kingdom this could have inspired ideas of healthy bodies contributing to the furthering of a healthy Imperial British race.

Bodily control was also a rhetoric that appears in the stereotype of the modern girl. The ideal of the active modern girl included a young woman in control of her body, both in terms of shape and spirit. Undertaking physical exercise was perceived as a method of controlling weight and of recreating your own body into the fashionable svelte athletic body idealised by film and sports stars. However, self-control was not just about the surface but also about demonstrating the spirit of modernity. Although specifically describing the Norwegian articulation of the modern girl stereotype, Brigitte Sølund’s identification of three key elements of a modern physical style is relevant to British and American contexts: ‘physical self-confidence, a graceful feminine body language, and a

certain “natural” ease’ (2000: 56). In appearing confidently on aerial equipment female solo aerialists exemplified self-confidence and natural ease whilst displaying movements that relied upon grace as much as strength for their completion. For those young women who identified with the ideal of the modern girl, successful aerialists such as Leers and Leitzel embodied the bodily control of the modern girl stereotype founded on physical vitality.

Press coverage of Leitzel suggests she was aware of the potential of her movements to align with the attributes desired by young women who aspired to the modern girl ideal. Local press coverage in the USA shows her climbing in rehearsal-wear, advocating ordinary women climb daily for a – frankly impressive – 30 minutes. The article describes Leitzel’s method of how to climb a rope and states: ‘It’s the best exercise possible for a woman – this climbing a rope. It makes for slim lines, pliant muscles, physical poise and mental alertness, according to Lillian Leitzel’ (‘Had Your Daily Climb?’, 1921a; ‘Had Your Daily Climb?’, 1921b). Physical poise bears strong similarity to the ideas of physical self-confidence and gracefulness highlighted by Søland, whilst mental alertness suggests the vim and vitality identified more generally with the modern girl stereotype. Elsewhere, Leitzel advocated female exercise as a means of creating a body with a healthy immune system, presenting her own healthy body as a prime example (‘Mite of a Woman’, 1920). In both examples, Leitzel was presenting aerial performance as an ideal form of exercise, within reach of her female audience members. Most importantly in advocating for female exercise, particularly by drawing reference to poise and alertness, Leitzel was framing her own aerial demonstrations of strength as feminine.

Female aerialists may have tapped into national ideas of good citizenship or ideals of vitality associated with the stereotype of the modern girl, but their performances demonstrated activity levels well beyond those of the women watching them. If female exertion risked associations with mannishness then how could these women be glorified in the circus ring or on the vaudeville/variety stage? Female aerialists such as Leers and Leitzel were performing activities far beyond the moderate exertion advocated by University and College educators. They were also performing activities that were more physically demanding and required higher levels of spatial understanding than those of elite women. Physical educators advocated moderate exercise for their University or College students, but women workers were permitted to perform higher levels of

exertion in public because they were free from accusations of being ‘unladylike’ (Cahn, 2015: 81; Hargreaves, 1994: 131). Aerialists were working women and may have been seen as part of the working classes because they displayed their physical labour to audiences for profit.

However, their representation in performance and newspaper coverage does not align with a simplistic reading of their status as working women being part of what made their high activity levels acceptable to the mainstream. Aerialists such as Leers and Leitzel were more closely aligned with aristocracy, both inside and outside the moment of performance, despite their working class status. Both Leers and Leitzel⁴³ appeared clothed in the capes and cloaks of aristocracy flanked by attendants: in Leitzel’s case a footman and maid were joined towards the end of her career by her third husband, the famous aerialist, Alfredo Codona (Bradna and Spence, 1953: 149; ‘Home video of Leitzel’, n.d.), whilst Leers was accompanied by her father (Beal, n.d.; Beal, n.d.: p.5; Braathen, 1933: 4). Articles that discuss aerialists also frequently position them within a biological lineage that evokes power through inheritance. Lineage is present in all of the feature articles devoted to Leitzel that I analyse in this thesis. One local newspaper article proclaiming her second marriage to the announcer, Clyde Ingalls, describes the concept of circus lineage most explicitly. Headed ‘Circus Has Own Aristocracy’ it goes on to describe Leitzel as ‘the queen of the air’ and Ingalls as the ‘prince of side show man and freak impresario’ (‘Circus Has Own’, 1920). The narrative that was presented by impresarios and performed by aerialists was not of female aerialists as working women but as privileged and powerful aristocrats. Chapter 2 has already shown how glamour derives its transformative power from nostalgic allusions to aristocracy. In this case aerialists glamorised their bodies through the inherited authority of circus lineage and performing aristocracy. In the same way as elite women were able to undertake more vigorous exercise due to their wealth and status than those caught in the middle of the social structure, aerialists were also able to display athletic feats by representing themselves as glamorous aristocrats of the ring.

⁴³ The cape Bradna mentions was probably used most extensively in the earlier years of Leitzel’s career. A newspaper article from 1920 shows a short cape (‘Circus Has Own’, 1920), whereas the video (‘Home video of Leitzel’, n.d.) that dates towards the end of her career demonstrates the use of tulle fabric draped over her shoulders.

Although this is the dominant reading that this performance of circus stars as aristocrats evokes, there is another that surfaces within the American context. Another interpretation draws upon the evocative American Dream myth of classlessness to combine the real status of Leers and Leitzel as working women with their performed status as aristocrats of the air. These are women who have gained their glamorous status as immigrants in America due to hard work. They have succeeded to transcend their working class status and in doing so have reaped the rewards of the capitalist American system. In doing so, their bodies reflect the benefits of being a good active female American citizen, demonstrating the commercial rewards of hard work and female activity.

Leers and Leitzel were performing levels of exercise that would have been considered mannish outside the circus ring or vaudeville/variety stage. Female soloists were demonstrating activities well beyond that conducted by any class of women and should have been censured for their visible exertion. Instead they were popular performers whose bodies were presented as glamorous and glorified. Part of the reason for their popularity was the way in which their bodies expressed national concerns with citizenship and tapped into the bodily control desired by women who aspired to be modern. The glorification of the aerialist as an aristocrat protected aerialists such as Leers and Leitzel from accusations that their high levels of exertion were immodest display. The public presentation of aerialists in the 1920s as strong women in control of their bodies, alongside other popular sports stars such as the swimmer Gertrude Ederle, was part of a process that permitted strength to feature in new feminine ideals.

Experiencing Aerial Action – Feminising Grace & Frenetic Activity

In discussing issues of visible exertion and aerial performance, there needs to be an awareness of exactly how much labour was actually visible to audience members. My physical experience as an amateur aerialist provides me with an insight into exactly how much effort goes into aerial activity but this also makes it possible that I might overstate how audiences experienced this movement. The relationship between the apparent effort required and the actual labour undertaken is not easy to identify clearly in aerial performance without such embodied experience, due to the kinaesthetic fantasy aerial performance inspires. When looking back at the aerialists who form the focus of this study, Leitzel is frequently described as having made it 'look easy' (Bradna and Spence, 1953: 150). This is the paradox of virtuosity: the more skilled and particularly controlled

the aerialist, the easier it looks. This apparent easiness is partially informed by the relationship between strength and grace in aerial movements and the way in which audiences experience aerial performance as a movement form. This section builds upon the previous discussion of weightlessness and grace to consider grace as part of the modern physical style. The elements contributing to grace have already been defined as bodily tension that facilitates aerial movement, similar hand and foot positions to those found in ballet and the kinaesthetic fantasy of weightlessness created through the swing and the aerial convention of performing movement as pain-free. The issue of visible effort raises the question if it is possible that audience members watching might not have seen the performances as physically demanding as they truly were, even if they were aware they could not perform those movements themselves?

Returning to Søland's description of a 'graceful feminine body language' as part of the modern physical style serves to historicise this discussion following the mention of ballet. Ballet is often considered feminine, primarily because of its association with grace and the impression of 'weightless femininity' it creates (Newey, 2013: 111). Physical educators had employed a separatist strategy from the mid-nineteenth century that positioned women's exercise as more acceptable if it could be defined as feminine rather than masculine. If the sport conformed to its own rules and modified movement it could be considered as separate to male sport, one of the clearest examples being netball that developed as a 'feminine-appropriate' form of basketball (Hargreaves, 1994: 30 & 124). The cultivation of balletic grace could therefore be used as a rationale for the form being appropriate to women. Leitzel's performance made the association between aerial performance and ballet explicit when she performed movements that were directly comparable to those found in ballet. The clearest comparison is when Leitzel spun or pirouetted, hanging from one of her roman rings with one leg pointed straight towards the ground and the other leg bent at the knee in a position that evoked the *retiré* in ballet. The similarity of good aerial technique to ballet poses made movements that displayed strength appear more appropriate for women, but the reference to ballet was something that aerialists such as Leitzel could choose to exploit to emphasise their femininity.

In the 1920s and early 1930s grace was associated with the types of exercise advocated as feminine-appropriate by physical educators and desired by women wishing to cultivate

the modern physical style. Leitzel's and Leers' performances demonstrated two of these elements: bodily control and grace. However, aerial movement depends on strength and grace working together. Grace does disguise some of the effort required to perform aerial action from audiences, but not all of it. Leers and Leitzel were performing acts of strength and endurance that were advertised as such ('Young European High', 1931; Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus, 1930a; 'All Circusgoers', 1921). Aerial movement has already been shown in Chapter 3 to be perceived through an individual's lived experience of movement, which would have led audience members to distinguish the balance of strength or grace along a continuum. If my experience is in any way indicative, it would suggest that the more active members of the audience would be more capable of identifying strength more clearly.⁴⁴ The interdependence of strength and grace would have complicated any clear decision on which was more apparent and would have absorbed strength into what was considered feminine aerial movement. Factors that would have influenced individual audience members' perception included their proximity to the bodies of female aerialists such as Leers and Leitzel within the tent or auditorium, but would also have been founded on their own lived experience of their individual moving bodies.

The impression of grace is dependent on bodily tension, hand and foot positioning and the physical response to dynamic aerial movement that appears weightless. The kinaesthetic fantasy created by aerial movement relies heavily on the emotive association of weightlessness with freedom and is epitomised in the swing. This fantasy is experienced in the simplest of movements, such as when someone uses the backwards and forwards motion of the swing to easily reach for the trapeze ropes. The sub-disciplines that demonstrate it most profoundly are those that traverse the aerial space such as flying or swinging trapeze. This fantasy has also been shown to be a learning experience that alters perception because every viewing of movement is a rehearsal in our own kinaesthetic system – allowing change to be perceived and altered through every fibre of the body. This supports the argument that those witnessing aerial performance would have shifted their perception of what was acceptable feminine movement by watching female aerialists perform actions that relied on strength and muscular control, provided it also included graceful weightlessness. Not only could aerial performance be

⁴⁴ Again this highlights the need for empirical research into how audiences experience aerial movement that could move this statement from speculation to a more concrete conclusion.

empowering because it reframed female strength as acceptable through bodily perception, the association with freedom also added another dimension to the empowering potential of viewing aerial acts.

Although all motion provokes a physical response specific to each individual's lived experience of movement, it is clear that more dynamic movement makes this response easier to perceive in the individual receiver's body. The specific examples of swinging and flying trapeze illustrate the experience of watching aerial performance most clearly because these disciplines require speed and demonstrate the swing most effectively. Speed is often associated with excitement, whilst the swing includes the barely perceptible moment when the forces of upward movement and gravity equalise and create a pause before gravity takes control. Even though my discipline is static trapeze, I have to admit that dynamic aerial action is more exciting to experience. This is why more static disciplines, such as static trapeze, silks (also known as tissu) or rope (also known as corde lisse) use drops so frequently to inspire audience excitement.

The sections of movement I have analysed of Leers' and Leitzel's acts so far in this chapter have been characterised as demonstrating control more than dynamism, but elements of Leitzel's performance did demonstrate frenzy. This occurred in both the key sections of her act: in the roman rings section where she briefly used her shoulders as pivots between the rings to create revolutions of her body over her head; and most extremely in the planche turns. All the descriptions of Leitzel's planche turn that have appeared within the last three chapters have emphasised the whirling nature and sometimes the violence of the planche turns she used to conclude her act. This endurance act involved slipping her wrist into the loop at the bottom of her specially designed rope. Hanging from her wrist by this loop she would kick her heels back and forth to create the momentum with which to swing her body over in a series of up to 100 revolutions around her wrist (DeBaugh, n.d.; Bradna and Spence, 1953: 150).

Close analysis of video reveals the complex movements required to complete the planche turn and the quality of motion it created ('Home video of Leitzel', n.d.). Much of this description is speculation based on my understanding of the principles of aerial movement as the planche turn requires considerable aerial training and is not taught in any of the classes I have attended. Kicking her heels back and forward Leitzel pushed

down on the right arm secured in the planche rope loop at the same time as forcing the left leg upwards – initially using the opposite leg to arm to force her body up straighter and the opposite left arm as a counterbalance. Once her body created enough momentum she would then bring the right leg up to join the left, positioning it just behind so that the legs could be projected together upwards. Her legs would split again as she pushed her hips up – presumably using the limb split as a means of shifting her hips and gravity so that her body was as straight as possible. Leitzel's body would slow as her head came underneath her body and her legs reached the apex at the top of the swing, forcing the rope to jerk. It is unclear from the video examined, but it is possible that she may have pulled up at the moment the rope jerked to maximise momentum. Here, she would curve her body, lifting her head and pushing her hips forward so that her legs began their descent. This would create the second half of the revolution, her legs splitting again as she used the left leg as a counter-balance that would prevent the right side of her body from forcing it directly under the rope. Her legs would then kick up as she pushed down on the right arm to begin the next full revolution. The fact Leitzel's legs repeatedly split and her body jerked maybe why some memoir writers denigrated her planche turns as a crowd-pleasing stunt (North and Hatch, 2008: 184; Manning-Sanders, 1952: 242). Good aerial technique is generally ascribed to smooth controlled movement with limbs that move together in unison or split cleanly and deliberately to form poses – instead Leitzel was presenting jerky or frenetic movement.

The frenetic activity of the planche turns were crowd-pleasing because it was easily comprehensible to those without detailed aerial understanding but may also have been attractive because of the significance of exercise in wider society. Interwar ideas of modern femininity required an energetic body freed of the constraints of the more passive femininity of the earlier generation. Leitzel's body was performing freedom in its demonstration of dynamic wild abandon with a wide smile of enjoyment (Atwell, 1930b) but it also displayed the effects of that movement. Those patrons prepared to pay a higher ticket price to be close enough to see her body clearly would have seen her breathing heavily or might have noticed her skin was flushed. Interestingly these women may have been those who were encouraged to partake in moderate exercise rather than the type of frenetic activity epitomised by Leitzel. Those able to see her body closely, would have seen that it was not invincible but was instead vulnerable to the effects of movement. In some cases, Leitzel performed that vulnerability and the toll her

performance took on her body as a performed faint once her feet had touched the ground after the planche turns (Bradna and Spence, 1953: 154; Taylor, 1956: 220). The same effects that exercise had on audience member's bodies would have been visible in Leitzel's and, on some occasions, were emphasised by Leitzel herself.

More generally, the endurance acts performed by Leitzel and Leers exemplified the repetitiveness of exercise. Both endurance acts and exercise are by their very nature repetitive. When performing an exercise discipline you perform repetitive activities, whether it is to win a competitive tennis match or to move through water when swimming for recreation. Repetition is part of gaining mastery over your body or improving its movements. The aerialist has this in common with anyone undertaking exercise or controlled movement, to master the movement you will need to repeat it many times – you fail and readjust until finally you conquer it. Even if the aerialist masters it first time they need to repeat it until the motion becomes embedded in their kinaesthetic system strongly enough that it is part of the repertoire and can be included safely in performance. For aerialist and scholar Lindsay Stephens this aerial repetition is 'like a kind of redistribution of labour' that offloads the concentrated work of the mind controlling the body to the body itself, 'This offloading is felt to free the mind for other things, like creative expression or listening to what the audience wants, or performing emotionally' (2012: 283). In the 1920s and early 1930s men and women were being encouraged to conduct the repetitive actions of exercise at a time when solo female aerialists were popular performing repetitive endurance acts. Experiencing these repetitive acts linked aerial performance to exercise and was part of a process of kinaesthetic learning that positioned the repetitive aerial body as weightless and free, and that contributed to female exercise and more generally to movement, being associated with freedom.

The cultural landscape of the 1920s and early 1930s that aerialists worked within influenced how their movement was experienced, but their movement also had the power to shift the perspective of audiences. The reception of aerial action is perceived through an individual's specific kinaesthetic system as rehearsed action, meaning that audiences experience the movements within their own body. This system also learns from receiving that same movement, permitting aerial action to shift audience members' individual perception of acceptable feminine activity as including demonstrations of

strength provided they include grace. This process of learning and shifting ideas was powerful because it did this with their embodied perception. It may not have changed minds with a well phrased argument but it was powerful because it was felt through every muscle fibre. Such adjustments through the somatic systems probably occurred at a slow rate, but this does not diminish their power to contribute to changing attitudes to femininity and the female body. What is also empowering about experiencing female aerialists is that the kinaesthetic fantasy they perpetuated reconfigured their strong movement as weightless or free. This freedom was epitomised in the particularly dynamic and frenzied movements of Lillian Leitzel's planche turns. Those prepared to pay higher ticket prices would have seen the effects on Leitzel's body of her exertion and would have understood exercise, that produced the similar effects on their own bodies, as providing access to those freedoms. Not only that, but Leers and Leitzel were popular performers executing endurance acts that relied on the repetitiveness of exercise, a further process of kinaesthetic learning that contributed to the association of female exercise with physical freedom. The association of exercise with freedom confirms aerialists' activities as having empowering potential for the women experiencing their acts.

The Problem of Muscularity

The ability to distinguish strength as more pronounced than grace in aerialists' demonstrations of physical freedom may have depended on an individual's lived experience of movement, but the muscle it relied on was another matter completely. It is possible that in the vast American circus tent distance may have allowed audience members to miss the muscular bodies created from practice, but this certainly would have been harder to avoid in the smaller European circuses or vaudeville and variety venues. It is also interesting that writers who admire these performers do not shy away from describing muscle and that the Ringling-Barnum circus represented muscle within publicity – what is fascinating is that muscle is often feminised in descriptions and representation. That is not to say that some writers did not express some distaste towards the unusually defined feminine muscle of performers such as Luisita Leers, and these concerns will be used to demonstrate how the glamour of the circus space extended beyond the moment of performance under specific conditions.



Figure 17: Luisita Leers feature image (1929) *Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Combined Show Magazine and Daily Review* ('road'/tenting version), CWM Mss3, Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin

The first image that drew me to Luisita Leers was Figure 17 from the 1929 Ringling-Barnum souvenir programme. Leers beams at the camera, looking glamorous in her fashionable wavy bobbed hairstyle and deco earrings, whilst flexing her considerable bicep and trapezius muscles. Dressed in a tight top with medals pinned to her ample chest, she looks glamorous and she looks feminine. The cosmetic advertisement positioned on the right facing page states 'Lovely is She – *who knows these essentials to beauty!*' and I find myself in agreement. This image highlights the extraordinary musculature Leers developed from her aerial practice and that she glories in it, glamorising it for audiences. This might be considered surprising because in the 1920s the concern with female muscle was a concern that women's bodies would become 'a facsimile of the male body... Rounded curves would be replaced by angular lines, softness by hardened muscle, and feminine refinement by bodily strength' (Soland, 2000: 50). It follows that Leers' performances demonstrating such a strong and muscular body should not have been considered feminine, but instead she is placed as feminine in publicity that had the power to extend the glamorous moment of performance.

The counter argument could be made that Leers was not being glamorised but that instead she was being presented as an intriguing freak. After all, Leers was described in the same programme as 'The Wonder Girl. A youthful aerialist of prodigious strength

and amazing skill in a twirling, whirling trapeze offering' (Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus, 1929b). The same or similar text was used to describe her act in her other appearances at the Ringling-Barnum circus (Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus, 1928a; 1928b; 1929a; 1930a; 1930b; 1931a; 1931b; 1932a; 1932b; 1933a; 1933b). One tenuous reading is that the word 'wonder' is a euphemism for the experience of witnessing a freakish body. This unlikely argument can be supported by an intertheatrical analysis as the Ringling-Barnum circus did exhibit non-normative and non-Anglo-European bodies in a separate space on the same site as the circus. However, an intertheatrical analysis that positions the female aerialist as freak is ultimately flawed because it does not understand the fundamental nature of the circus ring. In the Introduction I define the circus as a vibrant, thrilling, beautiful, colourful, awe-inspiring and sensational popular entertainment. Although the concept of the circus did encompass non-normative and non-Anglo-European bodies⁴⁵ in the 1920s and early 1930s these sideshow attractions were housed in a separate space. This was either within a separate tent when tenting or in a separate part of either Madison Square Gardens or London Olympia, and was subject to its own performative conventions that encouraged a different type of gaze. Sideshow audiences scrutinised the Other body rather than experiencing the bodily dialogue of oscillating identification and disidentification involved in kinaesthetic fantasy. 'The Strange People' might parade through the big top to drum up publicity for their attractions, something that happened in the Ringling-Barnum big top in 1922, but they never inhabited it or transformed it through their practice (Whyte, 2003: 31) – and for this reason the freak's natural home was not the circus big top. The space created by the performance of circus practices was not one of freakish derision or fascination but was instead a glamorous space of glorification, excitement and laughter.

Stoddart draws attention to the simplistic reading of the female aerialist as freak and offers a more subtle reading when discussing the representation of female aerialists in books and film. She states: 'The exceptional, in the realm of female achievement, may too easily be classified as the freakish or the abnormal. The acrobat's body is potentially both awesomely and disturbingly physical.' Instead, Stoddart situates the aerialist with

⁴⁵ Non-Anglo-European big top circus stars did exist within the circus but had to choose how to represent their race to succeed. In the case of the wire-walker Con Colleano and his trapeze artist sister Winnie Colleano, they chose to depict themselves as Spanish (Tait, 1996b: 30).

‘oddness’ rather than freakery, considering ‘This oddness is definitive of the circus body in general which is marked by the will to redefine and challenge what were seen as inherent physical limitations’ (2000: 176). Yes, there might be something odd or unusual about the female aerialist’s body, but that is not to consider it freakish. Instead, oddness can be considered a feature of glamour. The glamorous person is not like us, but is always different and distant; oddness sets the glamorous personality apart from the ordinary person experiencing them.

That is not to say that female aerialist’s muscularity was not noticed and witnessed with some concern. Tait highlights how Leers’ muscularity did receive attention that questioned her femininity in the street whilst she was working at the Ringling-Barnum circus in 1933⁴⁶ (2005: 81). She also cites another example of unfavourable attention when Leers was working the State Fairs in 1934 and 1937, where publicity displayed a strange relationship to her muscularity, positioning it as ‘sexually alluring but an object of derision, ...despite Leers’s demureness’ (2005: 87). She considers at the heart of this contradiction the disconcerting potential of female muscularity with its emphasis on traditionally masculine strength to ‘disturb objectification, belie identity classification and confront orthodox configurations of sexual desire’ (2005: 84). Although challenging the normal coordinates of gender is at the heart of Leers’ and other female aerialists glamour in the period, I consider the type of space in which she appeared as particularly relevant because both examples cited are unusual when viewed within the wider materials gathered as part of this research. Significantly these examples are both outside the glamorous Ringling-Barnum circus context and appear as part of State Fairs or as Leers walked down the street. It is more conventional to find it said of Leers that: ‘While retaining all her delightful feminine charms this youthful aerialist nevertheless displays prodigious strength and amazing endurance that any man would envy’ (‘Luicita Leers, European Star’, 1932; ‘Young European High’, 1931; ‘Luicita Leers, European Circus’, n.d.). This more common description of Leers’ body is one that positions her as feminine despite strength displayed through defined muscles. Men may envy her strength or muscles but that does not mean that she is not feminine – in this more common example, muscle is not separated from femininity, it is mentioned in the same breath.

⁴⁶ Unfortunately archivists at the Milner Library have been unable to source the typed manuscript of the New Bedford *Sunday-Standard Times* article Tait references within the Braathen Collection and I have been unable to locate it via online newspaper searches. I am unsure whether this article was published.

When read in the light of the conventional positioning of Leers' body within circus press and publicity these unusually derisive examples do say something interesting about space and the muscular female body. The State Fair was not the same type of space as the Ringling-Barnum circus space. Leers' act as presented within an agricultural context, was not part of the Ringling-Barnum circus with its associations with the city or streamlined mechanised American industry. Rather than being a glamorous space of glorification the State Fair was by definition rural and local. The Ringling-Barnum circus and its glamour existed as protection for the extraordinarily muscular Leers that could not be afforded by the State Fair or by the street. Walking down the street in a 'short-sleeved Summer dress' (in Tait, 2005: 80), Leers was not immediately identified with the glamorous Ringling-Barnum circus. It would be interesting to know if the same response to her body the writer expresses would have occurred if she was walking down the same street flanked by attendants, wearing her regal cloak and her circus costume. The purpose of Ringling-Barnum circus publicity was to engage in the glorification and glamorisation of its premier artists and celebrities, and this was a process that extended the circus space beyond the circus tent and into people's homes through publicity materials such as newspaper coverage and souvenir programmes. This analysis extends the coordinates of Tait's statement that 'The flier momentarily acts out the desire of physical bodies to defy the gravity of social categories, before returning to familiar territory when he or she halts the free fall and reinstates gender identity and the material order of bodies' (1996b: 33). Leers' body may have been glamorised as muscular in the moment of performance, but once her aerial action stopped and her feet hit the ground that glamour was not halted. Here circus publicity is another transformative form of circus practice: it extends the circus space's glamorisation of Leers' body beyond the moment of performance and into audience member's homes, provided she was represented as urbanely glamorous.

It is tempting to situate Leers as a particularly excessive example of aerial female muscle, but the muscle of Leers' colleague Leitzel was also noticed – despite the fact that she often covered her arms when not performing. Leitzel was the preeminent circus celebrity of the period and her glamour extended well beyond the circus tent. Her image was reproduced in national publications, making it likely she would have been recognised on the street in America even if most audience members could not make out her features in the giant Ringling-Barnum tent. Despite her glorification, male memoir writers often

describe her developed upper body in masculine terms. Quoting Roland Butler, Taylor states 'She had the shoulders of a professional wrestler, and her arms were steel bands' (1956: 219) whilst Ringling heir Henry Ringling North describes how despite being 'Exquisitely dainty and feminine, she had the shoulders of a Notre Dame tackle' (2008: 183). Like Leers, North's statement demonstrates that Leitzel's body was glorified for, and feminised whilst, displaying its muscularity. Both performers absorbed muscle into a glamorised representation of femininity.

The Problem of Competition

The muscular bodies of female aerialists were glamorised for muscle that heralded their competitiveness. Defined muscle mass demonstrated that they were prepared to reconfigure their bodies through pursuing their practice, whilst the endurance acts they performed are by their very definition competitive. Leers and Leitzel set themselves apart from other performers by showing how far they could push their bodies through a quantifiable number of revolutions around the trapeze bar or wrist. Returning again to the context of sports participation in the 1920s provides an insight into how the framing of competition may have made their muscular and competitive exertions worthy of adulation. The issue of competition and how it was addressed by popular sports promoters in the 1920s demonstrates that glamorisation of female athletes was happening in wider culture. The history of aerial performance suggests the roots of this glamorising strategy of feminising muscle. Throughout the history of women's sport separatist strategies have been used to make movement acceptable, and it is by appearing separately in the ring that female aerial soloists were able to successfully perform competitive endurance feats in the 1920s.

The discussion of female physical exercise earlier highlighted how problematic competition was for the women who undertook exercise and the desire of many for it. Although some women followed physical educators' prescription for moderate exercise others did not, and instead engaged in popular competitive activities. Cahn argues that this led to two separate strategies being established to make female exercise acceptable, both of which created two different models of the female athlete: University physical educators developed the non-competitive 'wholesome, modest athlete', while popular promoters created the 'athlete as beauty queen'. The concept of beauty became so aligned with popular female sports stars that at some basketball championships, women were even crowned as beauty queens (2015: 57 & 78). Cahn considers the 'image of the

athlete as beauty queen to have emerged in a variety of settings [in the USA] – white working-class and African American sport, smalltown schoolgirl athletics, media coverage of elite sports, and male-dominated athletic organizations’ (2015: 78). This strategy was one that relied on beauty or sexual desirability as a means of proving femininity and Cahn persuasively argues that it admitted ‘energy, vigor and muscle tone into the concept of femininity’ (2015: 81). The image of Leers presented earlier (Figure 17) seems a case in point – her self-assurance, her wide smile, fashionable hairstyle and earrings, and full breasts demonstrate her as unquestionably female and contribute to her appearing definitively feminine.

Although the athlete as beauty queen is not explicitly described in information on UK sports, it existed with a greater emphasis on respectability. British female sports stars such as the English Channel swimmer Sunny Lowry became a popular attraction at seaside resorts and trained girls in water-ballet and cabaret (Hargreaves, 1994: 128) – two events that suggest glamorisation of female bodily display. There may have been a greater emphasis on respectability of dress with swimming gala participants wearing loose-fitting swimming costumes, but there appears an echo of Cahn’s argument in Hargreaves statement about swimming galas. She states that they ‘provided legitimate opportunities for a woman to display her sparsely clad body for open viewing, producing an energetic and powerful image of the female body’ (1994: 128). This indicates that although the emphasis was higher on appearing decently dressed in England that sexual desirability, beauty and glamour made a strong female body more acceptable.

Sports participation, circus and film were part of a wider popular entertainment industry, none of which existed in a vacuum. The popularity of circus in the 1920s and early 1930s makes it likely that films such as *Variété* (Dupont, 1925) and *Polly of the Circus* (Santell, 1932), that used aerialists as their central protagonists, were deliberately borrowing from the circus as a means of securing popular success. Circus fan Sverre O Braathen expresses the link between circus and sport in his first letter to Luisita Leers – a letter that began a long friendship. Braathen describes how he has ‘collected a great many autographed pictures of baseball stars and it is my intention to collect autographed pictures of my favorite circus performers. I am, therefore, going to impose on you for a great favor. I would appreciate it very much if you would favor me with an autographed picture at my expense’ (1931). If sports stars and aerialists are perceived in a similar

fashion then it is likely they applied the same strategies to similar problems: such as making visible exertion, muscularity and competition feminine by glamorising women using their beauty or sexual desirability.

However, representing feminine muscle as beautiful was certainly not new to aerialists, suggesting that the roots of this strategy were amongst aerialists rather than in sport. As one of the first popular female aerialists of the late nineteenth century, Leona Dare aligned herself with aristocracy through the title of Queen of the Antilles and represented herself as a beauty to be gazed upon in her *carte de visite* ('Leona Dare carte de visite', n.d.; *Punch* magazine cited in Day, 1999: 154). This alignment with monarchy uses privilege to protect the popular star much as elite sportswomen were insulated from criticism for their competitive exercise. By the 1920s being a 'Queen' who was clearly situated at the pinnacle of social hierarchies invigorated the nostalgic power of glamour to redescribe what it was to be feminine. Whether or not American popular sports promoters were intentionally borrowing from aerialists, they were adopting a proven aerial strategy of using the power of glamour to glorify the competitive muscular exertion of women – thereby making their activities popular, mainstream and acceptable.

The separatist strategy that early supporters of women's sport advocated, and that led to the development of 'feminine-appropriate' sports such as netball or that emphasised attributes such as grace, may reveal another reason why female soloists were successful. Cahn considers the separatist argument as one that still divides feminists today, except today it revolves around whether progress is being held back by men and women not competing directly against each other. One argument considers 'normal' male bodies to be biologically more suited to sport due to higher levels of testosterone, whereas the counterargument is that by having men and women compete separately we designate women as forever secondary. In conferring secondary status, we hide when the best women regularly out-perform the vast majority of men in fields such as the marathon (Cahn, 2015: 290–1). In the 1920s and early 1930s, it was men like Alfredo Codona who conducted the most impressive feats such as the triple somersault in mixed troupes – women were instead included as the feminine element. The triple somersault was completed by Antoinette Concello in performance for her first time in 1937,⁴⁷ but even

⁴⁷ The triple somersault was first performed by a woman, Lena Jordan, in 1897 (Tait, 2005: 57).

then this was in a troupe where her husband Art Concello, had been performing it for some time (Brunsdales and Schmitt, 2013: 88–9). This leads me to conclude that women could appear in the ring on their own as competitive female soloists precisely because they did not compete directly with men. Even if the announcer claimed they were the ‘only person’ capable of performing a feat or described how any man would be glad to have their strength, the true impressiveness of their movements could be disguised because it was not directly compared within the same ring or stage, to male action.

Appearing alone in performance, glamorised by circus and vaudeville or variety spaces that were extended into homes by publicity, Leers and Leitzel performed acts that simultaneously questioned and redefined what it meant to be feminine. The acceptability of their competitive activity relied on two strategies: by appearing as soloists who did not directly challenge men, and through aligning themselves with the higher social orders to invigorate the power of glamour to redescribe female muscle as feminine. This strategy was also employed by popular sports promoters. The roots of this strategy can be seen in the earliest female aerialists, suggesting that aerial performers may have been the first stars to glamorise female muscle. Although the battle has not yet been won, this positions them as significant pioneers in the slow movement towards physical strength being regarded as a human rather than a masculine attribute.

Conclusion: Exertion, Muscle & Competition Reframed as Feminine

Analysing the female aerialist as an athlete-performer-entertainer explains some of her popularity as she straddled the popular worlds of performance and sport. It also defines how aerialists risked being considered masculine in the 1920s and demonstrates the ways in which their bodies countered such concerns. Building upon the previous chapter, it places female athletes and aerialists as central to concerns regarding blurred gender boundaries through the apparent masculinity of visible female exertion, competition and muscularity. Both women performing in popular sports and female aerialists participated in a process that absorbed strength into some feminine ideals using separatist strategies. In the case of female aerialists appearing as soloists prevented comparisons with men. Like other women who wished to exercise competitively, female aerialists countered arguments of mannishness perversely by glamorising the very bodies that risked censure. Highlighting beauty and sexual desirability had the power to prove femaleness, glamorising bodies and allowing strength to feature in femininity. Female aerialists may have been exceptional in demonstrating their feats of muscular endurance, but they were

also exceptional in demonstrating graceful weightlessness. Essential to their ability to glamour is the paradox that this thesis explores, they were able to reframe strength because they presented female muscular action *with* gracefully feminine weightlessness. Glamour relies on this redescription of femininity with reference to traditionally masculine attributes but it also draws its power from references to aristocracy. For sports stars this involved being the ‘athlete as beauty queen’ whereas for aerialists it was performing themselves as circus royalty – a strategy that has its roots in the performances of late nineteenth century female aerialists. Although this approach was widespread, it did have its limits because glamour relies on urban associations that were not carried into the rural State Fair, but could extend into people’s homes due to the power of circus publicity.

Glamorising the female muscular body and aligning it with femininity had particular resonance in the 1920s and early 1930s due to a societal interest in female exercise – something female aerial soloists both drew upon and reflected in publicity to succeed. The ideal of the modern girl whose beauty was derived from their health was an individual concern but also linked to issues of good citizenship. Active female bodies were perceived as acceptable because they presented healthy female bodies capable of reproducing healthy members of the British Empire or the American consumerist nation.

Considering the aerialist as athlete-performer-entertainer also allows some conclusions regarding the empowering potential of experiencing aerialist’s performances to be drawn. Although the process of watching the strong and graceful body was empowering, it is the learning potential of the kinaesthetic system that is most significant. Through watching moving bodies our kinaesthetic systems readjust their understanding of the world, meaning that those who watched could change their perception of what was acceptable feminine behaviour. Not only that, but aerial performance and its ability to create the kinaesthetic fantasy of weightlessness associated the female aerialists’ body and exercise with freedom. Aerial performance inspires a dialogue of constant identification and disidentification, and watching repetitive endurance feats whose exertion had a visible effect upon the body linked aerialists movements to individuals’ own experiences of exercise. The apparent weightlessness of such repetitive movements contributed to the association of exercise with freedom.

Although Leers' and Leitzel's moving bodies were empowering, there is a problem in glamorising the female body to permit strength. It relies on the body conforming to a different set of rules, ones that still had the potential to limit women. Leers and Leitzel were empowering only if they were represented as beautiful and sexually desirable.

Femininity still rests upon attractiveness, but these performers' radically muscular bodies have contributed to the expansion of what beauty and femininity mean: for me, strength is an integral part of what makes me feel confidently feminine.

Conclusion: Reflecting Upon a Composite Image

Now that all of the reflected images of the past have been scrutinised in detail, it is time to take stock of the blurry composite image that has emerged. The mirrors I positioned around my performers at the start of this thesis set out to reflect what the forgotten female aerialist as a popular performer and celebrity tells us about 1920s and early 1930s society and culture. Why were these women celebrities and what does their celebrity mean? How could they be so popular and lauded as feminine or presented as glamorous when their performances relied so heavily on bodies that risked censure for appearing muscular and demonstrating extreme strength through endurance feats? What do they reveal about changing attitudes to strong female bodies? What were the conditions of their aerial circus celebrity? I have discovered that it is precisely within these apparent paradoxes that lie a series of answers and that by scrutinising the past it is possible to make important statements about aerial performance as a performance form.

The methodology chosen to explore these questions is original within the fields of aerial and circus history. It was necessitated by the project and is suggested both by my historical position in relation to these stars as an aerialist and by the material itself. I undertook this research because I am passionate about an art form I practice and because no other academic has reconstructed these acts in as much detail to understand what they mean. My embodied understanding of aerial movement has fuelled my historical imagination and the way in which popular culture borrows and reflects from other forms suggested the cross-disciplinary approach. The female aerialist used similar strategies to the popular sports star and has been represented in similar ways to the film star, whilst film has borrowed from circus to gain popular success. As such, in this thesis I analysed transatlantic data on performance spaces that have not previously been considered alongside each other. Not only do the insights gained from applying a cross-disciplinary approach extend knowledge regarding the fields of aerial and circus history, they also contribute to: histories of popular culture, by remembering circus as a mass entertainment in the 1920s and early 1930s; celebrity theory, in highlighting that celebrity rests on similar concepts that are expressed slightly differently in circus from film or theatre; glamour theory, by highlighting the role of risk and in describing how glamour differs from celebrity in drawing upon the reimagined power of aristocracy rather than

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religion; scholarship on the modern girl, by demonstrating how the stereotype is reflected in wider culture and how this intersects with histories of female sports.

Female aerialists contributed to changing attitudes regarding what a woman could do and what femininity meant in the 1920s and early 1930s. In presenting strong bodies performing graceful acts these women were part of a movement that allowed strength to be incorporated for the first time into some ideals of femininity. The acts they performed cast a glamour over audience members both through the oscillating distance implicit in aerial movement and the mixing of traditionally gendered attributes of grace and strength. It is the apparent paradox that I sought to examine within this thesis that provides the answer: to be acceptable strength and grace had to be present in a complex composition within the popular star's image. Female aerial soloists reframed strength precisely because they used muscular bodies to perform gracefully feminine weightless action. The 1920s articulation of glamour reframed what femininity meant precisely by mixing the traditionally masculine within the female form to create a tantalisingly alluring image. The modern girl stereotype and its widespread appeal demonstrates that this redescription of femininity was happening in wider society as women negotiated what it meant to enjoy being a woman. I argue that female solo aerialists' acts were empowering for women because aerial movement is witnessed through the kinaesthetic learning system that alters perception through every experience of movement.

Female aerialists were able to reframe acts of strength as feminine provided that: they appeared as soloists in the ring and did not challenge male superiority by presenting virtuosity alongside men; performed a complex mixture of modern and traditional femininities through their acts of strength; and confirmed their muscular bodies as feminine because they were presented as sexually desirable. At the same time as the last confirmed femininity, it was also a radical act because it presented unconventional female bodies as something to be aspired to within the mainstream. Glamour uses the trappings of aristocracy in generating its power, and female solo aerialists drew on this by presenting their bodies as sexually desirable and performing themselves as circus royalty. In relying upon beauty to confirm femininity they were employing a separatist strategy that was being utilised in wider society by popular sports promoters, and were drawing on the trope of the aerialist as aristocrat that had been pioneered in the late 1800s. In the same way as the apparent paradox of performing femininity through strength acts

provides some of the answer to how they reframed strength as a feminine possibility, the gendered nature of risk also provided an answer to how strength could be remade feminine. Perversely, it is the higher level of vulnerability inspired by a female body at risk that made strength appear more acceptable because risk and skill need to be expertly balanced to be experienced as pleasurable.

I have confirmed the widespread appeal of Lillian Leitzel and Luisita Leers through the sophistication of marketing strategies and the scale of global circus in the 1920s and early 1930s. Circuses entertained millions in America in a long summer season and hundreds of thousands in London during a short Christmas season. The most prestigious performers were international stars who participated in the local event in America and inhabited the capital in England. I have reflected on both of these national contexts to consider circus as international whilst highlighting national deviations in the form. One such difference was the possibility of the same active female aerial body to be read as representing healthy race mothers capable of reproducing the British Imperial or American consumerist nations. Circus was part of wider celebrity culture as impresarios personalised their circus brand by tying it to their personal identities. There is a risk that such strategies could situate female performers as under the control of impresarios, but popularity as demonstrated by the most successful performers' professional international mobility had the power to present stars alongside management rather than under their control. Circus practices such as the movement from split to single focus for American feature acts were powerful in spatially designating celebrity. Although these conclusions are interesting and are relevant to other stars of circus as well as aerialists, the question of why aerialists were so popular is also indicated by space: by appearing above the heads of audiences, aerialists were able to present moments of democratised privilege by upturning the conventional relationship between ticket pricing, sightlines and performer proximity.

Although celebrity is aided by global audiences, publicity, spatial practices that designated high status and the democratised privilege of visibility in a crowded tent, it does not immediately explain their allure. Yet, the answer to this allure is a complex cocktail that combines these material considerations with how the form is experienced, and how showmanship balanced risk and skill and expert performances of gender in the 1920s. Circus publicity and circus' democratised privilege designate the circus as the most

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glamorous space for the aerialist in the 1920s and early 1930s. The scale of the coordinated publicity generated by the circus and the affluence of its operations draw a glamorous frame around the performance before it began. This circus context then interacted with how the movement form is experienced. Within the act, the kinaesthetic fantasy created by identifying and disidentifying with the aerial body cast a glamour over audiences. It is this glamorous relationship to distance where the star appears close but inaccessible that the circus enacted through its particular brand of democratised privilege. If democratised privilege is about bringing the star closer, then the ideal for glamour is the space in which the balance point is struck at a slight distance. Vaudeville and variety risk breaking the spell by revealing too much, whilst the circus places the star tantalisingly close enough that they are just outside of grasp. Allure is also generated within the act through expert showmanship, that perfectly balances risk and skill to create public intimacy as skilful vulnerability. Moving outwards from the circus context to wider society, aerial celebrity allure also relied heavily on expert performances of gender that reflected the concern that the boundaries of gender were under threat.

This research has revealed a great deal about the careers and performances of Leers and Leitzel. The methodology applied has enabled me to reconstruct and describe their performances in the fullest detail currently available using embodied aerial understanding that privileges their virtuosity. In the case of Leitzel this is particularly significant because accounts in memoir or biography inevitably focus on her dramatic and emotional personal life and notorious death rather than on the act that made her famous. It has also revealed the likely reasons Leers is not remembered as a celebrity despite displaying considerable virtuosity. Leers' performance was not as nuanced a performance of risk and skill and she did not negotiate her femininity in as complex a manner as Leitzel. Leers instead presented herself as a little too skilled and pushed a little too hard against the boundaries of acceptable modern femininity – within her performance there was not quite enough of the older expression of femininity to appeal to more conservative audiences. Unlike Leitzel, Leers also did not die a notorious death that chimed with narratives of aerial lives lived extremely. Her career was instead ended by unfortunate decisions taken when wider world events and changes in the circus industry had the power to curtail her career. So far, this thesis has hinted at a distinction between Leers and Leitzel that deserves reflection. Leitzel has emerged as an expert showman in control of her own career, whereas Leers did not have the same autonomy. The fascinating

letters between Leers and Sverre O Braathen stress how her parents travelled with her and describe a contractual dispute with the Hamid & Wirth Agency regarding some State Fair engagements (Braathen, 1932a). It is interesting that the expert showman Leitzel astutely made herself a celebrity by directing her career, whereas without the same control over her career, Leers did not.

The aims and boundaries of this research as well as the gaps in scholarship suggest a number of possible areas of future research and some limitations. Although this research set out to consider these aerialists within their various performance contexts and has suggested some variations in vaudeville/variety, it has inevitably privileged the circus. This is because circus performances represented the largest portion of engagements and the fragments which remain in archives are skewed towards these locations. However, it is possible that manager reports in the USA and British manager report cards may provide a fruitful repository of further information. Both reported back to booking agents or management on the success of acts, particularly focusing on the most prestigious stars. In 2017 the University of Iowa Special Collections and University Archives will complete the digitisation of the Keith/Albee Vaudeville Theater Collection (MsC 356) 1890-1952 Series I Manager Reports. The increased availability of these archives has potential to provide more information on the vaudeville context, whilst I still hope to locate manager report cards for the British number one Moss variety circuit.

The scope of this research was limited to white female-born performers so that they could be analysed in detail for what they revealed about femininity, celebrity and glamour. However, expanding this study to include the female impersonator Barrette and the aborigine performer Winnie Colleano who masqueraded as Spanish could fruitfully explore many of the themes of this thesis. In this period Charlie Rivals drew on Charlie Chaplin's iconic image to create a clowning flying trapeze act, appearing as a regular act at Bertram Mills Circus. My focus on virtuosity throughout this thesis has been productive, but aerial clowning complicates some of the conclusions about aerial performance. In theorising about how individual performers' acts made meaning I have relied on kinaesthetic theory which has been both revealing and is also problematic. Qualitative research into audience responses to movement could be conducted. Although it would be problematic to apply this without considering how bodies are conditioned by their historical moment to read movement, it would suggest some

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possible ways in which responses vary, such as how an individual's experience of movement affects their perception of strength. Attempting to understand national and international histories of circus has also highlighted how little critical scholarship examines the wider British circus context in this period. Wider research into tenting circuses, and the permanent Blackpool Tower Circus and Great Yarmouth Hippodrome, would provide useful missing contextual information on how the circus landscape was responding to world events beyond Bertram Mills Circus.

There are also ways in which the frameworks of this thesis could be usefully applied to other performance forms. In particular, the question of how risk and skill work within circus as a whole is worth further investigation. An early version of Chapter 3 was presented at the Popular Performance working group of the Theatre and Performance Research Association in September 2015 and led to further correspondence about the themes of skill and risk with one working group member. This indicated that the concept of public intimacy as skilful vulnerability could usefully be applied to other circus disciplines such as clowning, where skill and performed vulnerability are central to the performance of clown personas (Amsden, 2015). Considering how the risk of death is performed could also be usefully explored in Live Art practices, where the death of the artist exists as a similarly imagined yet actual possibility.

In using a methodology that relies so much on using understanding of movement to provide insights on history I have also drawn conclusions about aerial performance that are relevant today. The kinaesthetic fantasy of weightlessness has been shown to rely on 'graceful' hand and foot positions, the swing implicit in aerial movement and the aerial convention of performing movement as easy or pain-free. The way in which the body rehearses movement through the kinaesthetic system has also led to the conclusion that the pleasurable frisson, felt when experiencing aerial action, rests upon the rehearsal of both the possibility of failure and flying simultaneously within bodies that relate themselves to movement using their own specific lived experience. Finally, the performance of risk has been shown to be so important within aerial action that it is an aesthetic of the performance form. Contemporary circus often despectacularises risk, diminishing skill, and my experience investigating the past suggests that playing with the aesthetic of risk could add more variety to the contemporary aerial palate.

The current relevance of this research is not just restricted to what history can tell us about practice, its timeliness is also reflected in the issue of gender within contemporary circus and wider popular culture. In the final year of writing this thesis two major circus festivals were held in the UK: Circus City in October 2015 in Bristol and CircusFest in April 2016 in London. At both events the problems with balancing gender representation in programming led to programmed discussions on the topic of gender (Circus City, 2015; Roundhouse, 2016). There were few problems with booking all-male troupes, but it was somewhat harder to book all-female groups. This problem and a wider issue regarding the performance of gender was noted by theatre critic Lyn Gardner at the Edinburgh festival:

There is a bigger issue around gender, too, both in terms of balance within companies and of representation. ...many of the circus shows I've seen this fringe perpetuate traditional roles. ...This year's circus shows ask thought-provoking questions, but those behind the shows need to think more about how they present themselves on stage and the messages they send out about what contemporary circus is and wants to be' (2016).

Although I completely agree with Gardner, I would also add the proviso that there is frequently a lazy assumption in contemporary circus that showing a woman demonstrating strength is enough to subvert gender roles when it is conventionally more acceptable to do so in the ring than in wider society. This research has highlighted that the performance of gender is somewhat more complicated. This is precisely what makes it hard for women performing circus to not make meaning about gender, but it is also what makes it such rich material to draw from to make both circus and, more particularly, aerial performance.

One hundred years after Leitzel was performing as a soloist with Ringling Bros and Barnum and Bailey she is reappearing within circus and mainstream popular entertainment. Aerialist Ilona Jänti was inspired by Leitzel to make *Namesake*, a solo contemporary circus show that relied less on facts of her life and more on her after-image (Jänti, 2015). The recent fictionalised biography by Dean Jensen (2013) is clearly responsible for Courtney Vanoos' act *The Tale of Lillian Leitzel* that retells her life using dialogue and a limited repertoire on aerial hoop (Open Stage, 2014a; Open Stage, 2014b). The more significant adaptation of the book is a forthcoming film by Warner Bros that brings Leitzel's life back into the popular mainstream. It is interesting that the same errors regarding Leitzel's equipment that were present in historical newspaper reports are emerging within current descriptions of the film as it is announced (Hawkes, 2016).

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Despite the fact that Leitzel is remembered most strongly by circus fans interested in circus history, she is still exerting her influence not only on contemporary circus but also today's more popular entertainment of film. Film borrowed from circus to succeed in the 1920s and early 1930s and it will be interesting to see if this latest borrowing, this reimagining of Lillian Leitzel's star image, will accurately reflect her contribution to society and culture. Will it focus on the narrative of an aerial life lived emotionally at extremes, or, will it situate her amongst her female colleagues who all contributed to changing ideas about muscular femininity and desirable female bodies?

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Appendix: Image Clearances

Table 3: Image Clearances & Evidence by Page Number

Figure	Archive	page	Copyright/Trademark	page
Figure 1	Circus World Museum	259-61	n/a	
Figure 2	Circus World Museum	259-61	n/a	
Figure 3	Circus World Museum	259-61	n/a	
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Figure 7	University of Bristol Theatre Collection	265	n/a	
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Circus World Museum (Figure 1, Figure 2, Figure 3, Figure 10, Figure 11, Figure 12, Figure 14, Figure 15 & Figure 17)



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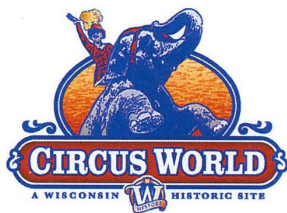
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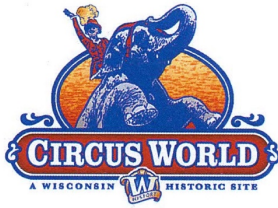
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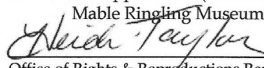
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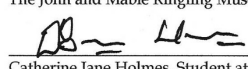
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V&A Theatre & Performance Archives (Figure 5 & Figure 6)

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Ref:009

Thank you for your email. To answer your questions:

1) Any record photography which you have taken yourself and will only be used for your thesis can be used without requesting permission or paying any fees. You will however need to ensure that all images are credited as follows: © Victoria and Albert Museum, London. More detailed guidance about using images from our collections can be found here: <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/h/how-to-use-search-the-collections/#faq> (the section marked 'Getting started with Images' is most relevant to your needs.)

2) Should you need to obtain any higher quality images of the items you have viewed then you will have to pay a fee. There are two services which we offer, and a great deal will depend on the quality of image required for your thesis. If record shots are of sufficient quality for your purposes (these would be taken by staff within our department using a basic camera in conditions where the lighting is not controlled) then this can be arranged through our department. There is a admin fee of £12.00 (£10.00+VAT) with an additional charge of £1.20 (£1.00+VAT) per image supplied. If however, you needed to commission professional standard images of items which have not yet been digitised, you will need to contact V&A images to arrange this and to discuss the associated costs. Their contact details can be found here: <http://vandaimages.com/contact.asp>. In either case you would need to provide a full lists (with reference numbers/details where possible) of all the images required so that we can put together a quote.

If you have any further questions you are welcome to contact us,

Yours sincerely,

V&A Theatre & Performance Enquiry Service.

<http://www.vam.ac.uk/page/t/theatre-and-performance/>

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